James L. Cambias: The Alien Abduction

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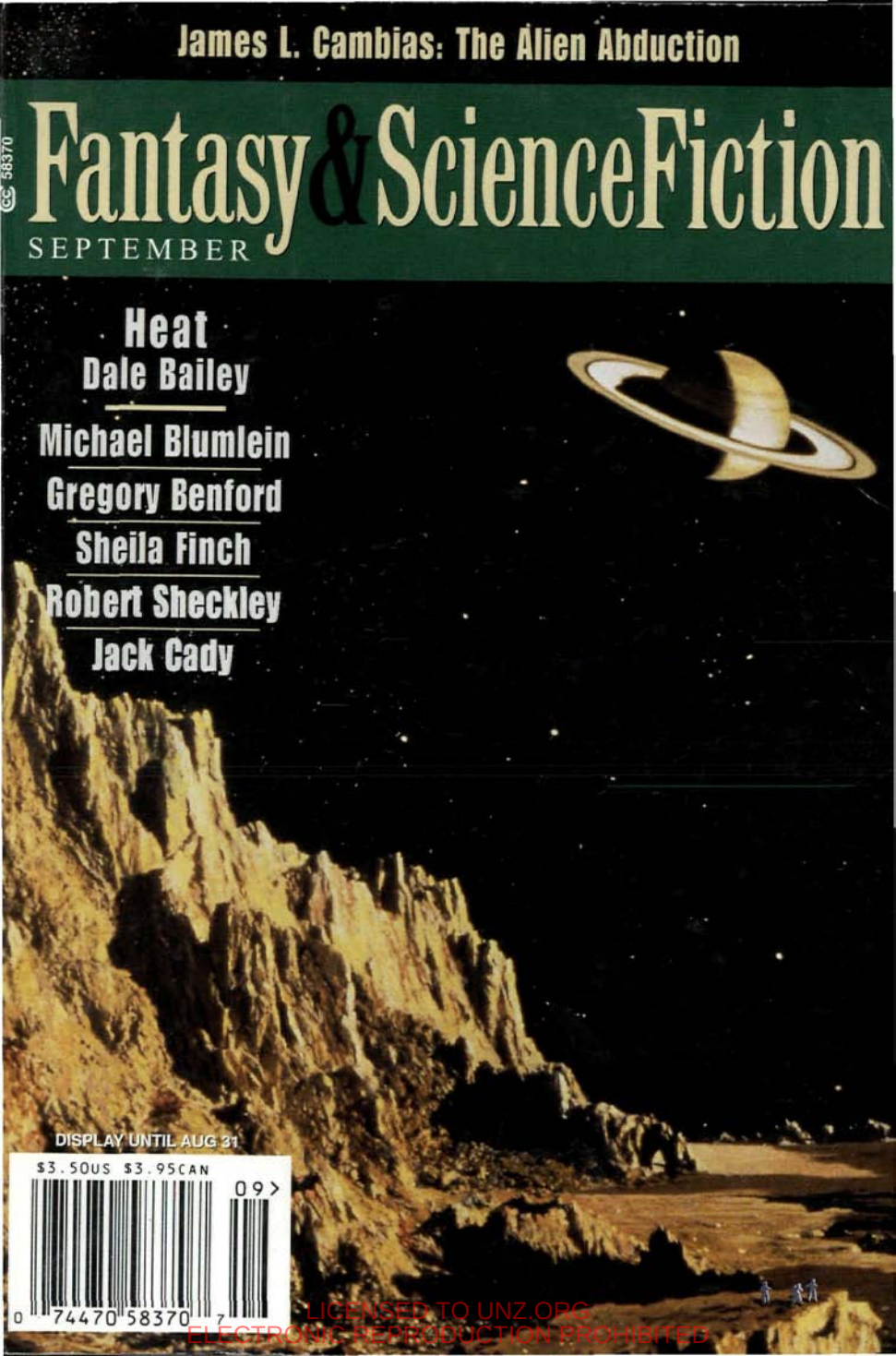

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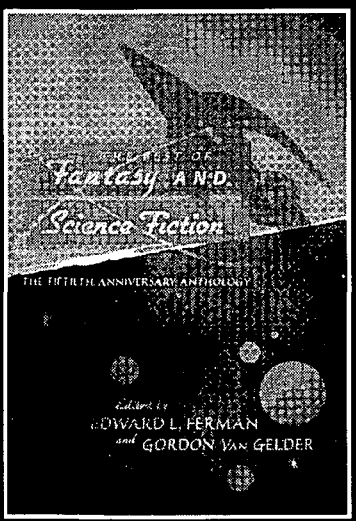

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James Cambias made his debut as a fiction writer earlier this year with the provocative story, "A Diagram of Rapture." His other writing credentials include various role-playing game adventures and his work for a local newspaper in Ithaca, New York. By the time this story appears, however, he and his wife and daughter will have left upstate New York for the Massachusetts environs near Mt. Holyoke.

His new story brings to mind Franklin D. Roosevelt's comment that "A radical is a man with both feet firmly planted in the air."

The Alien Abduction

By James L. Cambias

THE MORNING OF THE RAID I sat in a stolen minivan at the intersection of Game Farm Road and Ellis Hollow Road, listening to a professional killer talk about compost. The killer's name was Ed. He was a skinny old guy with a big puff of hair and beard covering his whole head. Rumor had it that he had killed at least eleven men — loggers and timber executives out in Oregon and northern California. He certainly did know a lot about organic farming.

"Corncobs are a pain. They take forever to break down on their own. You can leave a corncob in the bin for two or three years and it won't do anything but turn brown."

"My uncle puts them through his wood chipper," I said.

"A wood chipper! That's, what, half a liter of gasoline to break up maybe a bushel of corncobs? Screw that," said the killer. "You're putting something like two liters of CO_2 into the atmosphere just for a little convenience. No, you've got to think laterally about the corncobs. Read history. What did people do with corncobs before wood chippers?"

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"I dunno."

"They wiped their asses with them! No cutting down trees, no bleach, no scented quilted downy-soft crap — they used corncobs. And when they were done they threw them down the latrine. Back to the Earth. Total self-sufficiency!"

I winced a bit at that — he was lying on the back seat and couldn't see me. The alarm on my pad chimed. "It's ten. You'd better get in position."

He rose to a sitting position and stretched. "Yeah. Help me get the bike out."

The two of us wrestled Ed's bicycle out of the cargo compartment, then I fidgeted and kept looking at the time while the hardened professional killer put his bike back together. It was a great bike, to be sure — a high-tech recumbent touring cycle, with an energy-storing flywheel and about forty gears. But we weren't here for the Tour de Tompkins County, we had a mission.

After what seemed like forever, Ed was satisfied with the state of his bike, and turned his attention to his gun. I'd been trying to get a good look at it ever since Ed had joined our little team. A big gun does that to people. Even hard-core pacifists with BAN WAR TOYS stickers on their cars can't help being fascinated by a very expensive, well-built machine that's designed to kill people.

Ed's killing machine was a great beast of a Russian-made sniper rifle, and it stood in the same relationship to my uncle's old deer rifle as a helium-cooled supercomputer does to an adding machine. It used liquid propellant to shoot a slug as big as a man's thumb at six times the speed of sound, packing about as much kinetic energy as a bowling ball dropped off the CN Tower. The brute power of the Russian gun was wrapped in a high-tech envelope of Japanese and American lethality-enhancement — stabilizers and shock absorbers and a computerized gunsight as big as a Sapporo can perched on top.

How a scruffy old Deep Green forest gnome like Ed had ever gotten his gnarled hands on such a triumph of technological killing power was a mystery to everyone. However voluble he might be about compost, the old man was remarkably tight-lipped about any details the FBI or BATF might someday be interested in learning — like his real name, for example.

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My phone peeped. I clicked it on. "ET phone home," said a voice, followed by another click and silence.

"The Brazilians are at the airport," I told Ed. "I'd better get going."

"Nice knowing you," said Ed, and without another word turned and headed for a tall maple growing about ten yards off the road. He had to waddle a bit because of the climbing spurs on his boots. With his gun slung over his shoulder, Ed started up the tree.

I hustled back to the minivan and peeled off down Game Farm Road to a stand of trees about a hundred yards from the intersection with Route 366. I pulled into the ditch, took out my brand-new chainsaw, and got into position among the trees.

Ten minutes later my phone peeped again. "Saludo, amigo," said Pete Sutherland's voice. "I am now Brazilian and it feels muy good!" Click.

For just a second I felt all queasy and scared. Up to now we'd all just been fooling around. We could have called the whole thing off and been guilty of nothing worse than car theft. But not anymore. The call meant that Pete, Jerry, and the Huffberg twins had just overpowered and tied up three Brazilian diplomats from the UN. This was now officially Heavy Shit. I started the chainsaw.

Five minutes later the Cayuga Livery Service van went past. Jerry was in the driver's seat, inscrutable behind his sunglasses. The van slowed and turned at the entrance to the Carl Sagan Institute for Xenology. I held my breath as the van stopped at the security kiosk in front of the gate. It all depended on whether Pete and Inga and Dolph could convince one paunchy middle-aged Kampus Kop that they were in fact the Brazilian diplomats from the UN whose names were written down on his visitor log sheet. Ed was watching through his sniperscope, and if things turned nasty he was to lay down supporting fire while our faux Brazilians made their escape.

The van was between me and the kiosk, and it seemed to sit there far too long. But then the high chainlink gate rolled open and the van rolled sedately up the drive toward the building and I could exhale.

I pulled out my phone and called Ira. "They're in!" I shouted over the noise of the idling chainsaw.

Ira was the diversion. To keep Cornell security and the Ithaca PD busy, Ira's job was to feed five dollars into a pay phone in front of the

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Johnson Museum and call in bomb scares at a bunch of local schools, the hospital, the airport, and the Cornell air-conditioning plant. That accomplished, he was to stroll casually to a point in the middle of the suspension bridge across Fall Creek gorge, take a small radio transmitter out of his coat pocket, and detonate the bomb he had planted in the basement of the Fiji fraternity house the night before.

The sound of the chainsaw was too loud for me to hear the bomb two miles away, but my faith in Ira was absolute. My job at this stage of the plan was to drop a cedar across Game Farm Road to block access from the north, then drive south to the junction with Ellis Hollow Road and put up a pair of white sawhorses with a DO NOT ENTER sign I'd stolen some weeks before from a sewer construction site.

Driving south, I looked up at the big maple, where Ed the gunman was carefully sighting his giant rifle in on the emergency generator at the Institute, a quarter-mile away. He put five rounds into the generator, then swung his rifle around to bear on the electrical transformer on a utility pole half a mile up the road. Three rounds were enough to set it on fire. His mission accomplished, the old man climbed down the tree, wrapped up his rifle in a canvas tarp and slung it under his bike, then pedaled off in the direction of Oregon.

I set up the barricade, then drove to the rendezvous point on a dirt road off Turkey Hill Road. So far everything seemed to be going according to the plan. Pete's car and the meat truck were still where we'd parked them before dawn. I got my stuff out of the minivan and put it all in Pete's car, then pulled the minivan in among some trees where it was invisible from the road. Finally I sprayed the inside with four cans of oven cleaner to take care of any stray bits of DNA that Ed or I might have left behind.

The sky looked good. It was still overcast — pretty much a given in Ithaca between September and April — which meant we wouldn't have to worry about satellite spying. I couldn't see any spy drones overhead. The ground was perfect for our purposes, bare of snow (it had been a dry November), but already frozen hard enough not to pick up tracks. I started to believe we might just pull this off.

The van pulled up as I finished with the oven cleaner. No bullet-holes in the panels, no pursuing squadron of police cars. Jerry gave me a thumbs-up as he eased between the meat truck and Pete's car. Pete hopped out to

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open the doors at the back of the meat truck, Inga and Dolph came piling out of the back of the van, and I got my first look at the alien.

Pretty much everyone on Earth has seen Sushi the Alien in videos and interactives, but let me tell you it really isn't the same as a meeting in the flesh. For just a second he looked right at me with those funny star-shaped pupils and I'm not ashamed to say I was a little afraid. That beak is nothing to sneer at — it isn't anything like the cute parrot-beak they give him in cartoons. Sushi's beak is saw-edged with a wicked point, obviously nothing but a weapon. The lack of a lower jaw made it look all the more sinister. Steam puffed from the nostrils along his long neck in the chilly air.

Jerry gave him an encouraging shove from behind, and Sushi stepped out of the van. He was big — his hips were level with Dolph's shoulders as he stepped down to the ground, and his armless horizontal torso was bigger than any man's. The tail extended a good two meters behind. One of his clawed feet was twisted and shrunken, and he limped as he moved away from the van.

Pete had laid a couple of boards as a kind of crude ramp up into the meat truck, but the alien disdained them and stepped easily up onto the back bumper in a single motion.

Pete and Dolph were busy moving some computers and a bunch of disks into the back of Pete's car. I hadn't recalled robbery as being part of the plan. "What's all that stuff?" I asked.

"Translator software. We'll need it to communicate," said Pete. "Don't wait for us — get going!"

Inga rode in the back of the truck with the alien, Jerry took the wheel and I climbed into the passenger seat. Jerry released the parking brake and the truck moved out onto the road. No cops in sight.

The Plan, as worked out by Pete and his nameless friends who were paying for the whole thing, was to drive south on back roads and then get on the interstate at Elmira. We would then take a long wide detour down through Pennsylvania to Maryland. Our backers had arranged a safe house there in a county where the DA was sympathetic. Once in Maryland we could get in touch with the Washington media and get our story out. We'd have a big press conference and expose everything — how the astronauts had kidnapped Sushi, how the scientists had kept him a prisoner, and how

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he'd been abused in captivity. The world would demand that NASA send him back to 36 Ophiuchi II and close down the interstellar program.

That was the plan, and when Pete had contacted me through some mutual friends and asked if I wanted to be part of such a big-deal piece of political theater, naturally I'd jumped at the opportunity. As the Local Guy, my job had been to devise a route that would get us out of Tompkins County quickly and unobtrusively. The simplest route would be to go southeast on Route 79 to pick up I-81 at Whitney Point. Of course, the state police and the Feds could look at a road map and see the same thing, so I'd worked out a route which would take us on back roads through Brooktondale and Danby to Chemung County, and onto the highway at Elmira. Jerry and I had made the run a couple of times and I thought he had it down cold. But instead of turning south on Turkey Hill Road, Jerry turned north.

"Maryland is out," he explained. "Pete and I decided to go with plan B instead."

"How come?"

"Had a little trouble back at CSIX."

"What kind of trouble?"

"While Pete and I were getting the alien into the van, Inga and Dolph decided to, ah, tidy up loose ends. We had all the vivisectors locked in a closet upstairs, so those two went back up and emptied a clip from Dolph's Uzi through the door."

"Jesus! How many?"

"Eight. At least, that's how many people were up there. I don't know if they got them all."

"What the fuck did they do that for? That wasn't part of the plan! This whole thing was supposed to be clean!"

"When we came busting in they had the alien all wired up with electrodes and were making it run on some kind of treadmill. That kind of thing really bugs Inga."

"Jesus Christ. So now they'll call us a bunch of fucking murderers."

Jerry downshifted to pass a fat kid on a bicycle. "Pete didn't feel that our friends in Maryland would be too happy about that. So we're going to lie low at the house in Lansing until we can get our side of the story to the media."

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"Jerry, that house belongs to one of my grandmother's friends! If anyone finds out we've been there it'll be a big neon sign pointing right at me."

"Then I guess you'd better make sure nobody finds out, yes?"

"Jesus." When Pete had asked me to find a backup hideout near Ithaca, I hadn't really given it much thought. We had the Plan, after all. Mrs. Venetucci's house had seemed perfectly adequate for a backup. Mrs. Venetucci lived in a nursing home in Florida, and her son was in the Navy. The only time anybody went near the place was during the summer, when my Uncle Ray came by once a month to cut back the brush along the driveway and mow the grass.

"I thought we had everything planned so nobody would get hurt!"

"Don't worry. This is just a setback. Once people learn the truth, killing those vivisectors will be justifiable homicide."

We rumbled through Varna at a perfectly legal 40 and crossed Route 13. I kept checking the rear view for police cars, and tried desperately to remember if there was anyone who I'd told, anyone who might guess that I was involved in this. The others had been big on "operational security," but as long as we were just freeing the alien it hadn't seemed like such a big deal to me. My Students for Ethical Science friends at Cornell would never report me for pulling off the biggest, showiest lab raid ever — but murder might get them talking.

A sudden awful thought struck me. "You didn't do anything to those Brazilians, did you?"

"Other than taking their clothes, tying them up and locking them in a shed, no. I'm sure they'll be fine."

I looked at him for a moment, trying to decide if he was telling the truth.

The Venetucci place was about two miles northeast of the airport, surrounded by farmland waiting to turn into suburbs. Branches scraped against the side of the truck as Jerry eased up the drive. The house was small, boxy, and not very attractive, but the roof was sound and there was propane in the tank for heat. I went to the front door to get the house unlocked while Jerry opened up the back of the truck. Inga was singing some kind of Celtic lullaby to the alien. Pete and Dolph arrived in time to help get him out of the truck and into the house.

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* * *

When the strange humans, stealthy and treacherous, entered the teaching-shelter, I gave them little attention. Many strangers, curious and ignorant, come to look at me, to ask me questions, to make speeches. I am polite when I must be, and ignore them when I can.

Scott Father Scientist, wise and quick-moving, and his followers were doing another of their experiments. They asked me to run on a strip of moving floor so that they might learn about the qualities of my body. To run without moving, with hoses taped to my nostrils and wires taped to my hips and chest — not many males would consent to behave in such a manner. But I am old and a cripple, and learned to swallow my pride when I was still a virgin. So as always when Scott or Ali Father Scientist, small and far-traveling, asked me politely if I would consent to help them, I agreed.

The task was hard. My cursed foot keeps me from running any distance, and I prefer to hunt by stealth and ambush — or better still, to tell stories and let others catch the meat. So I ran and puffed into the hoses and thought of my children and tried to ignore the pain in my foot. I barely noticed when the door opened and Elena Virgin Student, curious and long-haired, came in with three guests, silent and watchful.

Then the trouble started. The lights went dark and the strip of floor stopped moving. I tripped and fell. The strangers began shouting and waving objects. I did not have the translation box on so I could only understand a little of what they were saying. But I could see that Scott and Elena and all the others were frightened.

I was also frightened. I admit it readily; only new fathers trying to impress one another pretend otherwise. But my fear was not that of a warrior before battle or a hunter making a difficult kill. It is hard to explain. Among the humans I was like a newborn just learning to walk at its mother's side. From the moment I agreed to accompany Marina Mother Pathfinder, slender and polite, on the voyage through the sky in the flying shelter, I had depended upon the humans for everything. All the things that I learned during my stay on Earth only served to show me how much I did not understand. I did not know what to do, so I did nothing.

The three of them made Scott and Elena and the others go out into the hall, and herded them into a chamber, small and cramped. One invader

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who looked like a mother human hurried to my side and tore off the wires and hoses. She gestured for me to follow her. I obeyed.

They acted with remarkable swiftness for humans. Normally going on a journey requires four or five vehicles and a retinue of interpreters, scientists, guards, and others. It is like driving a herd to winter fodder. My captors had a single vehicle, and two of them helped me into it while the other two remained inside the shelter. The back of the vehicle was cramped and had no padding, but I was able to get in. As soon as all the humans were in the vehicle, it left at great speed.

I saw little during the journey. They covered me with a skin and kept my head down. We rode only a little time before changing to a larger vehicle which was enclosed. It smelled very interesting inside, of blood and meat. The mother rode with me and kept stroking me and making a chanting sound. Despite the noise I relaxed a little. It was obvious that the humans had me at their mercy, yet they had not harmed me. Evidently they wanted to keep me alive. That was good. But what was their purpose?

They could hardly intend to rape me. Were they just young and poor, seeking status and wives by a bold act?

Eventually the vehicle stopped, and the humans helped me out and brought me into a small shelter. They showed me a chamber, and moved their upper limbs around until I realized they were trying to tell me to rest there. The mother remained with me for a time, stroking me and chanting until I wished for silence. She went away and soon returned with two of the fathers. One had a translation box.

"Hello," they made it say. "We are your friends. We will not hurt you."

That seemed promising. "I am glad. I will not hurt you either."

"You are free now. You are safe. We will help you."

"That's good. What are we going to do here?"

The humans conferred among themselves. "This is a safe place. The others will not find you here. We will wait until it is safe to leave. It may be many days."

I wondered if there was something wrong with the translation box. The humans at the teaching-shelter freely admitted that their creations sometimes did not work properly. It almost sounded as if these humans were protecting me from Scott Father Scientist and the others.

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"Is there food here?" I had eaten the day before, but if they were going to keep me many days it would be wise to keep my belly full.

More consultation. "We can get food for you. What do you want?"

"I like beef and lamb if you have it."

"We will bring you food."

That didn't sound very promising. It would probably be tuna. I much preferred beef even though Chau Mother Scientist, clever and long-haired, kept insisting that tuna was more like the food I was used to. We had argued about it more than once. I maintained that beef looked, smelled, and tasted like the flesh of a browser, and even came from a creature that lived by eating plants. Whereas tuna was different in every respect, and moreover came from a swimming animal. Chau had gone on about some occult quality which made tuna more like browser meat than beef, but I didn't believe it. From her breath I could tell that Chau often ate beef, and like many hosts she was serving the second-best meat to her guest.

"Is there anything else you need?" they asked.

I knew what that meant. They were asking if I wanted to shit. Humans are laughably delicate about that, and never do it where others can see. "Not now. After I've eaten. Will you want to keep it?"

That caused no end of discussion among these strange humans. Finally two of them went out and the other three sat down on the floor with the box. "We want to ask you some questions."

If I had a piece of meat for every time someone asked me that on Earth, it would make a feast for an entire tribe. But this time I was their captive. "Ask."

ONCE WE WERE snug in Mrs. Venetucci's house, Pete, Dolph, and Inga changed out of their Brazilian diplomat suits and went in to talk with the alien. My job was to get the place habitable again. The Casa Venetucci hadn't exactly been luxurious back when people lived in it, and the empty years had not been kind. We had power and heat, but I had to go take the pump apart and put it back together before we could get any water. I got cold, wet, and covered with mud and oil, but being part of a Cause made it all seem glamorous and important.

Jerry went out for food and came back with a bag of Indian food for the

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human contingent and a couple of pounds of raw tuna for our guest. Sushi for Sushi, if you will (I probably owe a royalty to the *Post* for that phrase). "The town is really hyper," he said. "I passed a National Guard convoy on Route 13, and there are helicopters everywhere."

"Did you have any trouble?"

"Not really. There's a roadblock on Route 13; they're searching every car coming out of town. The cop told me there's going to be a curfew in town beginning at eight."

"Did you get hold of Ira?"

"Yeah. He's going to come out here later. I was listening to the radio in the car — somebody found the letter Pete left behind, so at least they know why we did it."

"And? How are the media handling it?"

"Oh, the typical corporate media pretense at being objective. They had a sound bite from one of Pete's friends in Maryland, buried in a whole bunch of propaganda from NASA and Cornell about how Sushi came here willingly and all that crap. How's our guest?"

"I don't know. I've been out here doing housework."

The smell of lentil curry finally brought the Inner Circle out of Sushi's room. They emerged looking gleefully horrified — like teenagers coming out of the summer's coolest slasher movie.

"So what's the score?" I asked them, trying not to seem like somebody's little brother tagging along with the hip highschool kids.

"They've been brainwashing her," said Pete. "Filling her head with all kinds of propaganda. Trying to turn her into a good little Western consumer. It's the imperial cycle all over again."

"And all the while they've been using her, doing experiments on her, invading her body, raping her body with probes and metal tools," said Inga. "We should have destroyed the whole place."

"Anything really juicy? Something for the headlines?"

"Isn't it bad enough they were raping her with wires?" Inga was so angry she was trembling.

I shut up, but privately I was a little disappointed. I mean, I didn't doubt breaking Sushi out of the lab was a good thing, but if the Huffberg twins really had blown away a bunch of scientists, we would need something pretty Nazi-like to justify their little outburst. A rectal probe

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or whatever doesn't really cut it — every man over forty gets some doctor's thumb up his butt once a year, but you don't see any grass-roots support for shooting proctologists.

Pete must have noticed my concern. "Don't worry. We've only started. I'm sure once we get the full story there will be plenty of details for the media. It's all in the spin, anyway."

"The important thing is that we spoke out," said Dolph. "We made our voices heard. All action is communication."

At six we watched the news. The news was bad. Four of the scientists Inga and Dolph had shot were dead, and another one was in critical condition. All the talking heads referred to us as "the terrorists." The Feds were raiding every organic grocery and vegan deli in central New York looking for us. The story had its own theme music and a snazzy little graphic of Sushi in a blindfold. Dolph was visibly pleased by that.

When the newsbeings started to repeat themselves I tried to get a word alone with Pete. "How long are we going to stay here?" I asked him.

"I'm not sure. A couple of days, at least. You're going to have to figure out some way to get out of here without going through any roadblocks."

"That's no problem. But I'd be happier if we had a definite time set up for departure."

Just then there was a pounding on the door.

Dolph and Pete went for the guns. Inga killed the lights and Jerry went to peer out the window. I forced myself to walk to the door, with my mouth suddenly dry and my heartbeat sounding loudly in my ears.

"Will you guys open up already? It's me!" I was never so relieved in my life as when I heard Ira's muffled voice through the door.

I opened up the door with a big grin that faded when I saw that he wasn't alone. He was holding another man in a headlock with a gun pressed to his temple. The man's ski hat was pulled down over his face, but I recognized the cruddy old safety-orange parka and the neon green ski cap covered with little Dr. Seuss fish. It was my brother George.

"George!"

"You know him?" asked Pete.

"Brian?" said George, a little muffled by the ski cap. "Is that you?"

Pete shot me an angry glance. "Bring him in and tie him up," he said.

"Tie him up? He's my brother, for Chrissake!"

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"And what's he doing here, then? Maybe he put two and two together and was planning to tell the Feds on us like Ted Kaczynski's family did. Until we know more he stays here, and if he does anything he's dead, understand?"

I helped Ira get George into the kitchen, and we tied him to a chair with a couple of extension cords I found in the closet. Ira sat on the counter behind George, out of his line of sight, and then I pulled off George's hat.

He looked bad. Not that George ever looks good, of course, but in addition to his uncombed hair and permanent three-day beard he was pale and shaky. "Brian, what the fuck is going on? Who are those guys?"

"They're, um, people I know. They won't do anything, really. You'll be fine."

That didn't reassure him — or me either, to be honest.

"What are you doing here, anyway?" I asked him.

"I thought I'd get out my big binoculars and bike up here to watch the *Marco Polo* dock at the station."

"Jesus. Why didn't you tell me?"

"What's to tell? I come up here sometimes when it's good and clear. It's easier than getting up Mount Pleasant on my bike and the trees block out most of the sky glow."

"Jesus," I said again. George and his fucking hobbies. He's five years older than I am and never finished college because he was in too many clubs to bother going to class. He's completely uninterested in any kind of activism and the only thing that saves him from being a cog in the consumer machine is his monumental laziness. For the past seven years he's lived in my grandmother's basement, going through a series of six-month stints at different entry-level jobs and spending all his free time reading manga, watching movies at Cornell, looking at the stars, biking, building model spaceships, and playing computer games. About once a year he gets up enough courage to talk to a woman, and spends a couple of months in a torrid relationship that collapses as soon as she realizes that he doesn't plan to quit being a geek just because he's getting laid.

Now his stupid hobbies had just put the whole operation in danger. "Does anyone know you're here? Anyone at all?"

"I don't think so. The sky was so overcast this morning that I didn't

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think I'd be going out at all. Larry and I were going to go see *The Day the Earth Stood Still* at Cornell, but the whole campus is closed off and the movies are canceled." He stopped, blinked, and then looked at me with round eyes. "Brian, tell me this isn't about the alien. Please tell me your friends are just dope growers or pedophiles or something."

"It's all right, really. We just freed him from the lab where they were torturing him."

Ira frowned but said nothing.

George tried to get up but the extension cords stopped him. "Jesus Christ, Brian! Busting into the Vet School to free the bunnies was stupid, but this is fucking insane!"

"Calm down. It's all right. If you keep quiet everything will be fine."

He struggled a little and then sat there glaring at me. "So what are your friends going to do with me?"

"I'll go see. But you have to keep quiet, understand?"

I left him sulking in the kitchen and found Pete, Inga, and Jerry in consultation in the living room.

"What are we going to do with him?" I asked.

Before they answered, Inga and Jerry each had to go through a little song and dance about what a fuckup this was, and how it was all my fault. Pete let them go on for a few minutes before jumping in.

"All right, people. I believe Brian understands. I'm sure he's as upset about this as all of us."

"I really will be upset if you're planning to do anything to George. He is my brother, after all."

"You have to understand our position, Brian. He's a tremendous security hazard. We can't let him go."

"Our work is too important to risk," Inga put in.

Pete silenced her with a look and turned back to me. "So we've come up with a workable compromise. We'll hold your brother here until we relocate; then he can go free."

"He won't talk to the cops — I promise he won't."

"But can you really be sure?" asked Pete. "There's too much at stake to depend on his good will. After we're gone it won't matter."

It struck me that I was the only one George could identify anyway. Once we were gone, all he'd accomplish by talking would be to put me in

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jail. I didn't believe George would do that to me. So maybe this would work out after all.

"I'll tell him," I said. "I feel sure he'll go along after I explain it to him."

"He will have to stay tied up, though. We can't afford to have him wandering around. The less he sees, the better it is for him."

"Don't worry. I'll make sure he doesn't see anything." After Inga and Dolph's little episode at CSIX, I didn't want to give them any reason for doing anything to George...especially since they might want to eliminate me, too, just to be sure.

George didn't like it, but when I explained the alternative would quite likely be the two of us getting shot by Inga, he grudgingly agreed. So George lived tied to a chair in the master bedroom, and I got to feed him his meals and help him use the bathroom. I'll spare the details. Mrs. Venetucci's television still worked, and her programming bill was paid automatically out of her pension, so George had a hundred channels to watch. Not a vacation in Bali, but at least he wasn't buried in the basement with a bullet in his head.

Meanwhile the Inner Circle spent lots of time with Sushi the alien, leaving Jerry and me to keep house and watch out for Feds. And on the third day Pete came out of Sushi's room with a look of triumph. "We've got them," he said. "Those bastards."

"What is it?" asked Jerry.

"Hands," said Pete. "Those twisted Frankensteins want to give it hands."

I ATE FIVE MEALS in the shelter with the strange humans. They insisted on eating with me, but I am used to human ways and did not mind. The meat was skinned and cut in pieces, and when they first brought it to me on a flat stone I couldn't eat it. Finally one of the humans put the meat into a stone that was hollow like a skull, and then I could dine more comfortably. When I spat bile on my food, they looked alarmed, and asked if I was ill.

"No, this is usual for my people," I said, slurping up the liquefying meat with my feeding tube. "You need not worry." Their concern made

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me braver, for it was clear they meant to keep me well and healthy. Perhaps they wanted me as a hostage, then.

The first two meals were tuna, and then they gave me something called catfish, pale and insipid. When I asked for some lamb, warm and bloody, they said it was impossible. They themselves ate plants at every meal. I soon realized that the tuna and catfish must have been all the meat they could find. It was very generous of them to save it all for me. I was touched, but also careful — those who are poor and hungry often commit desperate acts.

And each day they asked me questions. Many, many questions. The curious thing was that they did not ask about my world and its creatures, or my people and their ways, or even about my body. They seemed to be most interested in what the other humans at the teaching-shelter did. Why they did not simply ask them instead of capturing me I could not understand.

It was not easy. Many of the experiments Scott Father Scientist and Ali Father Scientist did were mysterious to me, and so were very hard for me to explain to these others. But I am a Singer, learned and clear-voiced, so I did my best to inform and entertain them.

"On several occasions they have asked me to give samples of my spit, so that they might understand how I eat. Once they even slid a long, thin stick down my throat to discover the workings of my gut."

"Did they force you to do that?" asked the mother. She kept asking me that whenever I described an experiment.

"No. It was uncomfortable, but I am the head of a family so I did not complain."

The father who seemed to be the leader shook his head from side to side. "What's the most painful thing they've done to you?"

"The pricking with needles to draw my blood hurts a little. Once when they were trying to learn how I breathe they took blood several times a day. I told Scott Father Scientist he should wait until after I died to devour me." They did not laugh. The box did not translate jokes well.

"But why do you let them?" The mother spoke loudly. "They're just using you!"

"I am a guest in their shelter. And they seek to help me and my people."

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"You can't really believe that, can you?" asked the leader father. "They only care about getting grants. You're just a source of data. They don't want to help you at all."

"Perhaps you have heard untrue things," I said.

"Or maybe they've been lying to you. Have you thought of that?"

I considered what he said for a moment, then dismissed it. "No. If they were not trying to help they would not be making the hands."

"What hands?" they all asked at once.

"Once I asked Ali Father Scientist, small and far-traveling, if I could have hands like you humans. He laughed and said it was impossible. But Satoshi Virgin Student, plump and helpful, heard me and suggested it might be possible to make hands for me to wear. So now he is making me a hand, and when I return to Seishaef all my people can have them."

"What kind of hands are we talking about here?" asked the leader.

"Are they going to attach something to you?" added the mother.

"Satoshi said he thought of that, but then decided to create something simple, so that my people could make others themselves. It will hang from the base of my neck on a strap, thick and snug-fitting, and a cord tied to my tail will make the hand open and close. I have tried it once, but Satoshi needed to change the way the cord attached to my tail."

"But why?" asked the father. "Aren't you happy the way you are?"

I lifted my foot, twisted and shrunken. "I was cursed in the womb. I have never been happy as I am."

"Well, okay, but aren't your people happy?"

"Most of them are, I suppose. They hunt, they bear children, then they father children, then they grow old and die. But you humans — you do so much more! You live in a world of wonders! Meat, fresh and tasty whenever you wish! Shelters, warm and brightly lit, and water, cool and abundant! You can do things not even the gods, shining and nameless, can accomplish. I want my people to have the things you humans have, and when I bring them such gifts they will honor me above chiefs and prophets."

Humans show many of their emotions by moving parts of their faces around. I am still learning to tell what all the face movements mean, but it did seem to me that these humans were not happy.

* * *

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When Pete and Inga came out of Sushi's room, I was sitting on the floor with my USGS map printouts spread out around me (forget those wimpy commercial road maps — they only show the roads you're *allowed* to use), trying to find a way to get past the roadblocks with a truck full of vegans and one Ophiuchian. Jerry was helping by phoning people around the county to ask which roads were open. It was tedious and annoying work, so when Pete started going on about how the scientists were a bunch of Frankensteins and all, I found myself arguing with him for once.

"What's the problem, huh? Sushi's people don't have any hands — shit, they don't even have jaws. Maybe this isn't such a bad idea."

Pete looked at me with a more-in-sorrow expression, and shook his head pityingly. "Brian, you're still thinking like a Second Millennium person. Changing the world instead of adapting to it."

That kind of got my back up. He hadn't spent a whole day getting the water pump working. "Yeah, but you said it yourself — Sushi wants to have hands. Why not give him what he wants?"

"Her," snapped Inga. She'd been doing that ever since we first started planning the raid. "She has carried life in her womb and we should respect that."

"Yeah, and she has a dick the size of a zucchini, in case you hadn't noticed, so I'm respecting that."

That little exchange gave Pete time to think of a response, and he started in at full power. "Think about all the things we've been fighting, Brian. Deforestation. Pollution. Exploiting animals. Technology. Humans have done all those things with their hands. Siusheas and his world have been spared that. They live in a perfectly natural balance with their environment. It's like Eden, Brian. No technology at all. And now those bastards at CSIX want to give them hands so they can start raping and defiling their own world just like we've done to Gaia. They've shown him all their fun technological toys and dazzled him with material things, but they haven't shown him how technology has destroyed the planet and is destroying our souls. We've got to stop this madness before they can infect another world. We'll show Siusheas why it's a bad idea, and then go public. It'll be perfect."

"You really think that will convince people?"

"Absolutely! We're talking about deep-rooted archetypes here. Eden.

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Innocence. Rousseau's Noble Savage. Now NASA wants to corrupt all that. This might be the lever that we use to bring down the whole Western paradigm."

I couldn't very well argue with that. I could see Inga was waiting to jump in again, so I just got up and left the room. "I'd better check on George," I said over my shoulder.

George was watching the Cop Channel when I came in. Some Canadian Mounties were busting a pirate software operation; as usual the bad guys weren't wearing shirts. That was reassuring — as long as I kept the house chilly enough, we'd be safe.

"I heard shouting just now. Is everything all right?"

"Okay, I guess. Pete was just going on about making sure Sushi's people don't fuck up their planet the way we've done. Don't worry; everything's still cool."

George sat quietly for a moment watching the Mounties chasing hackers through some suburban streets in Calgary. Then he lowered his voice. "You know who these people are, don't you? They're the dedicated members."

For a second I thought he meant the guys on the TV. "The what?"

"The dedicated members. Every club and organization has them. They're the ones with no outside interests, no friends, nobody to sleep with and no life. They come to every goddamned meeting even if there's four feet of snow on the ground, because they don't have anything else to do. If you have one or two you can put them in charge of finances or the Web site or something, but a bunch of them can mean trouble. They start trying to show each other how dedicated they are, and the normal people eventually quit and leave the group controlled by fanatics. It happened to the model railroad club at SUNY while I was there."

"George, what the hell are you babbling about?"

"Dedicated members are dangerous, Brian! All real evil in the world is created by dedicated people. Hitler was a dedicated member of the Nazi party and they put him in charge. Stalin was a dedicated member of the Communists. Mussolini started as a dedicated Fascist, but then he got a cute mistress and a sports car. Most normal people would rather watch TV or have sex or something instead of committing atrocities, but dedicated people will happily go start hacking up people with machetes or building

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germ bombs because they don't have a life. These people you call your friends are dedicated, and if you aren't as dedicated as they are they'll kill you." He looked desperately sincere, almost pleading.

"Even if that's true, we're still doing the right thing."

"Locking an alien in Mrs. Venetucci's bedroom and shooting a bunch of scientists is the right thing? How do you define the wrong thing?"

"The wrong thing is despoiling the planet! The wrong thing is wiping out whole species! The wrong thing is polluting and overpopulating and exploiting our environment!"

"And this is going to stop any of that? Get real. Nobody listens to a bunch of armed nutcases."

"Pete's got a plan. We're going to go public and show everyone the truth about how NASA kidnapped Sushi and what they're doing to him."

"Brian, maybe if you read *Scientific American* instead of getting all your news from some hemp paper newsletter you'd know the alien came here willingly, and the scientists have been doing everything they can think of to take good care of him."

"That's all just propaganda."

George looked like he was about to say something, then stopped himself and sighed. "Never mind, Brian. Forget I said anything. Turn off the TV, will you? I want to sleep now."

THE NEXT DAY was an exhausting one. Three of the fathers and the mother came to me as soon as it grew light and began to argue with me. They did not wish me to have hands, and they tried to talk and debate in order to change my mind.

It was entertaining at first. It had been long since I and another Singer, cunning and song-wise, faced one another in a duel of wits. Even with no audience it was good to debate with logic and poetry.

But after a few exchanges the argument grew dull. These humans could not appreciate a clever logical trap or a well-turned phrase. When they could not prove a point they simply repeated it. It was like a practice debate with my children when they were still virgins.

After the midday meal they resumed, and I found my patience dripping away.

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"We're trying to spare you and your world what humans have done to this planet," said the father leader, loud-voiced and persistent, starting yet another round of the argument.

"Why? Your world is a very pleasant place. The woods have been cut back, fodder for beasts grows everywhere, and the rivers and streams flow abundantly. You have wide roads and great cities. I wish Seishaef was just like your Earth."

"But don't you see? All the wild places are gone! The whole environment is human-made now! We're completely out of balance with our ecosphere. We're cutting down forests and polluting rivers and overfishing the seas. Surely you don't want that. Your people still live in harmony with your world. Giving that up is a huge mistake."

"Before Marina Mother Pathfinder, slender and polite, invited me to come to your world, I lived in the valley of Fiashues, lush and well-watered. It is a good place, for the valley floor is rich in fodder. My own tribe has seven thousand browsers, fat and docile, and our clients have half that number. But the open lands below the valley are dry and windswept, with scanty fodder and many empty gullies. In places I have seen dunes of sand herded by the wind. There are many old riverbeds, and the middens of old settlements on the plains, and the oldest stories tell that once that land was home to a million browsers. But where browsers graze too long, the sands come. We did not need hands to turn the plains to desert."

They spoke among themselves in whispers with the translator switched off, and then the father turned to me again. "Exactly! You've already managed to harm your environment by overgrazing. Imagine the damage you could do if there were more of you and you had tools."

"Would it not be better for us to find out for ourselves if having hands will harm our world or help it?"

"But you won't give them up, ever. You'll get sucked into the cycle of consumption. You won't be able to stop. You and your people will get too attached to your conveniences and luxuries to give them up, even if it means poisoning your world."

"What you are saying is that you do not wish my people to choose for themselves because you are afraid we will not make the choice you wish us to make."

There was a long pause. The other humans looked at the leader. He

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looked at me, and breathed two or three times before speaking. "We want you to make the right choice, that's all."

"I understand," I said. After a moment I added, "I will tell Satoshi I no longer wish for hands."

Pete and the others came into the kitchen where I was eating some leftover seitan barbecue.

"It's lying," said Pete as soon as the door was closed.

"What is?" I asked.

Pete didn't even look at me, but Jerry said, "Siusheas. He told us he's willing to give up the whole hands project when we return him."

"How do you know he's lying?"

"Because I know!" said Pete. "They've already gotten to it. We're too late. It wants hands just like ours so it and the rest of its species can start cutting down trees and polluting rivers and slaughtering animals. It's lying to us."

"Maybe if we talk to her some more," said Inga. "Make her understand."

"We'll try again in the morning. But if we can't change its mind, we'll have to try something else."

Jerry raised his eyebrows at that. "What else?"

"We — one of us will have to shoot it." Normally when Pete spoke he would stare you right in the eye, but this time he was staring off into the middle distance, like he was talking to himself and we weren't there.

We were all too stunned to say anything, and Pete went on quietly, almost thoughtfully. "It's the only way. With the alien dead, the whole hands idea falls apart. It will be years before NASA brings back another Ophiuchian. Maybe by then enough people will be mobilized to stop the whole thing."

"Pete, we didn't break Siusheas out of the lab to kill him," said Jerry. "That's a really bad idea and I don't want any part of it, understand?"

"Me neither," I added. The whole thing was getting more and more messed up.

"We have a responsibility," said Pete. "The Ophiuchians will destroy their world if we don't stop this now."

Jerry just looked at him. "I said what I feel." He left the room.

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"Um — I think I've figured out a route we can use around the roadblocks," I said. "We have to do a little off-road driving, but the ground's pretty hard and I think the truck can make it."

"Pete? Did you hear that?" asked Inga.

"Good. We'll leave tomorrow, then. I'm going to get a good night's sleep and then in the morning I'll try to talk some sense into Siusheas."

I shoved the box of seitan over to him and went to see George. He was dozing in the chair with the news on. One of the researchers Inga had shot was conscious again, and had issued a statement begging us not to harm Sushi. I shut off the screen and woke George.

"Good news — we're leaving tomorrow. I'll make sure to cut you loose right before we go." I untied him from the chair and helped him hobble into the bathroom. He turned on the faucet and shut the door.

"Stay behind, Brian," he whispered. "Those friends of yours are just going to wind up getting gunned down by snipers after a nine-hour siege in some cheap motel. We can claim they took us both hostage."

"They need my help to get past the roadblocks."

"Screw the roadblocks! Draw a goddamned map. But don't go with them. Please. I don't want to wind up telling some reporter how you were a good boy and never got into trouble."

"For one thing, you'd be lying."

He smiled for the first time in days, but his eyes still had that pleading look. "That's true. So are you staying behind?"

"I guess so. It may take a little finesse, though. I'm not going to mention it until everyone's ready to go."

"Good idea. See you in the morning." I tied him to his chair again and turned off the lights.

I decided to escape that very night. The humans were acting like a group of mothers getting ready to pull down an old father and steal his wives.

Getting out was easy. The door of my chamber was flimsy, and I simply kicked it down with one blow from my good foot.

The large father, light-colored and silent, was in the hall outside. He reached for a weapon, but like all humans he moved slowly. I lunged forward in a killing strike, plunging my beak into his chest where humans

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keep their hearts. Two strides got me to the large room, where the mother pointed her weapon at me and cried out. I gave her a blow with my tail, knocking her across the room.

It took me two kicks to get the door to the outside open, and then I was free, loping through the darkness to the cover of the trees.

When I heard the crashes and shouts my first thought was that the FBI had found us. I was almost relieved. But there were no gunshots, no cries of "Freeze!" and so I kicked off my sleeping bag and hurried out.

Dolph lay on the floor in the hall, a big triangular hole right in the center of his chest. There was blood everywhere. The door to Sushi's room was broken into pieces.

Pete was in the living room with Inga and Jerry, pulling on his boots. "Brian, you stay here and get rid of anything they might use to trace us. We're going to have to burn down the house. Pour gasoline everywhere but don't light it until we get back."

"Where are you going?"

"We have to kill Siusheas," he said.

"I'm leaving," said Jerry. "This is totally fucked. We've got to get out now."

Pete's answer was to jam the hard plastic muzzle of his gun into Jerry's forehead. "I'm not going to argue. Either come with me or I'll blow your fucking brains out."

"Okay, okay! Keep cool. You made your point."

"Good. Now let's move." They hurried out into the night.

As soon as they were out of the house I went to George's room.

"What's going on?" he asked sleepily.

"Sushi busted loose and killed Dolph. Pete and the others are going after him. We've got to get ready to burn down the house."

"Like hell we are. Call the cops, right now."

Outside I heard one shot, and then two more. For a second I thought of grabbing Dolph's gun and going after them, pulling a Chow Yun Fat out in the woods. But the sound of another shot startled me out of that little daydream, and I pulled out my phone and hit the red 911 button.

"Please state your location and the nature of the emergency," said the soothing computer voice.

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I swallowed, and then said in a loud voice. "The alien is at the Venetucci residence on Bone Plain Road in Lansing. Hurry — they're trying to kill him."

OUTSIDE IT WAS COLD, but light enough for me to see. The sky on Earth glows faintly at night, and there is a bright white disk like a pale sun which shines on some nights. I made for the shadows of the trees and waited, standing very still. They had weapons, but even a human cannot kill what he cannot see, and they are almost blind at night. Being cursed in the foot has made me very good at hunting by waiting in ambush.

Three came out — the lead father, the mother and the father who operated the vehicle. The leader looked around for a moment, then started in my direction. Either he was wise in battle-craft or just lucky, for the hard ground did not take prints and humans cannot track by scent.

They spread out as they came, with the leader and the mother on either side of the vehicle operator. The mother was coming almost directly for me. I waited, measuring the distance and tensing my neck and legs. When she was two strides away I struck, but she tried to duck aside and instead of splitting open her chest my beak only slashed her shoulder to the bone. She cried out and dropped her weapon. I finished her with a quick cut across the neck.

The leader fired his weapon twice, but did not harm me. The other father turned and ran away. The leader fired once at him but he kept on running and got among the bushes.

I left the mother bleeding to death and bounded back into shadow. The leader was approaching warily, his weapon at the ready. I moved behind a tree and folded my legs to lie upon the ground. He fired at something off to my right.

He stopped at the body of the mother, and nudged her with his foot, but she was dead already. He shouted something back toward the house, but when there was no reply he turned again with his weapon raised, and stood there listening. It was wise of him to stay out in the open where his weapon would let him kill me if I charged. We were stalemated, in a way — he did not dare come among the trees where I might strike at him from hiding, and I was not about to leave my cover and charge his weapon.

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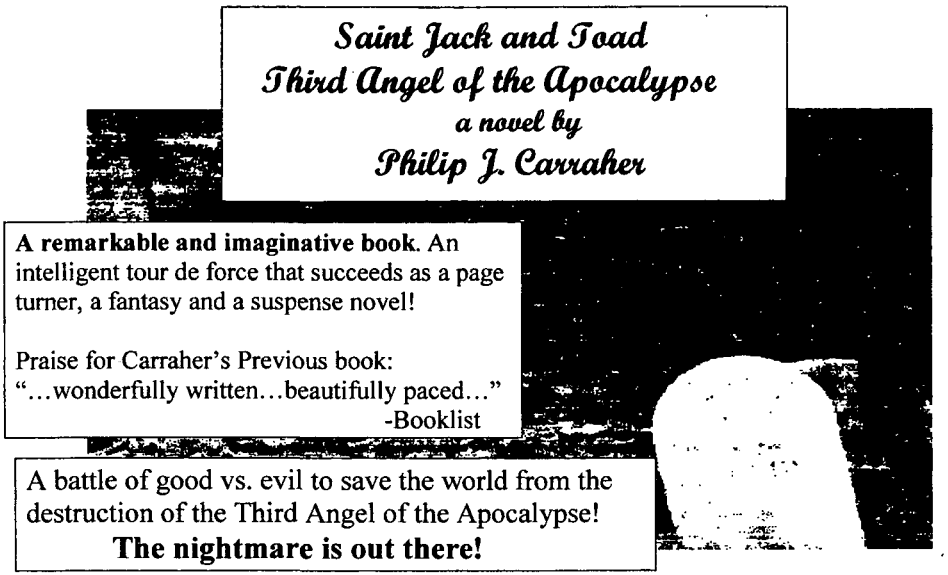
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We might have stayed there all night, but then came a sound like distant thunder, only instead of dying away it grew steadily louder until it was a great rhythmic pounding noise from the sky accompanied by winds and a chorus of keening. A shaft of light as bright as day shone down upon the human, and great voices spoke from the skies, and he put down his weapon and raised his hands in awe.

I got off pretty easily — the only crime they could really pin on me was accessory to kidnapping, because my lawyer helpfully pointed out that once I knew about the murders at CSIX I had good reason to fear for my own safety. The Feds were more interested in nailing Pete and his friends down in Maryland anyway. I wound up pleading guilty to conspiracy, and spent two years in a minimum-security McJail with a bunch of tax dodgers, cigarette smugglers, and gun nuts before getting out on parole.

Because of the old "Son of Sam" law, I couldn't profit from telling my story, but George turned into a media monster. He was everywhere — talk

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shows, chats, zines, the works. He wrote a book about the whole business, which took a while because he wouldn't accept a ghostwriter. The movie fell through because George started thinking he was Orson Welles and wanted to do the screenplay and direct and play himself and maybe even sing the theme song.

Pete's family hired a Dream Team to defend him, but he insisted on taking the stand and blew the whole thing. He went on and on about how the human race was a blight on the Universe, and how we six had been right to kidnap Sushi to protect his people. At one point he tried to convince the jury that if he was guilty, that proved the rightness of his cause, and so he should be let off. They didn't buy it.

Though I was involved in my own problems, what with the trial and all, I did keep up with the news about Sushi. It was interesting to see how the coverage of him changed. Before the raid he'd been kind of a comic character — big, sweet, and harmless, like a Sumo wrestler. During his captivity in Mrs. Venetucci's house he was a victim icon. But afterwards, the tone was a bit more respectful. Even the tabloids quit calling him Sushi. I guess being able to kill a man with one blow of your beak is a good way to build a rep. There was actually a little public discussion about the whole hands project, which ended when Sushi made a little public statement to the effect that it was none of our goddamned business.

Today I finished making a hand entirely on my own, using the one Satoshi gave me. The task was not easy, and took many days. The belt and cords are animal hide, and the gripper is made from wood and bone. It is not as good as the one Satoshi made me, but it works. When I return to Seishaef I will be able to make others, and show others how to make them.

As I tried the new hand, Ali Father Scientist asked me a question. "What will you do now that you have hands?"

"I do not know," I told him. "Perhaps great things, perhaps terrible things, perhaps nothing at all. We shall see."

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

Gardens of the Moon, by Steven Erikson, Bantam Press, 1999, £9.99.

I'VE BEEN wondering lately when it was that the epic fantasy novel came to be pretty much solely equated with war. It's as if when writing *Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien had focused solely on the battle scenes, eschewing all the elements that create a sense of wonder and awe.

Steven Erikson's debut novel *Gardens of the Moon* is a good case in point.

Now don't get me wrong. Erikson gets a lot of it right. To start with, while this is apparently the first in a projected ten book series entitled *The Tales of the Malazan Book of the Fallen*, *Gardens of the Moon*, for all the obvious teases and plot lead-ins to further volumes in the series that become apparent toward the end of the action, stands admirably on its own.

Also to his credit, while he doesn't bog the reader down with unnecessary details, Erikson has clearly spent a lot of time building the world in which *Gardens of the Moon* is set. The background arises as we need to know it instead of being force-fed to us in large chunks of "historical" exposition. Even better, the story is character-driven, somewhat of a rarity in the genre of epic fantasy where all too often the characters are obvious foils, on stage simply to move the story forward.

Mind you, there are a lot of characters, each with a fascinating history and story, and it takes some time to get to know them all and keep them straight. The many plots and subplots, fast-paced and full of surprises, also feel like a hopeless tangle at first. But to his credit, Erikson quickly pulls it all together.

The overall plot is basic enough: There is the Malazan Empire, bent upon utter domination of all that surrounds it. Standing against it are a handful of Free Cities and a floating fortress called Moon's Spawn

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that is home to a mysterious and ancient race of sorcerer-warriors. Complicating matters is the internal strife within the Malazan armies, as well as the appearance of a number of this world's gods who have also entered the fray for reasons of their own.

Our sympathetic viewpoint characters range from all sides of the struggle, an interesting strategy that allows no one side to be obviously in the right.

The down sides of the novel (and one assumes the series as a whole, unless Erikson plans some major changes in his approach in later volumes) are two:

The first is the lack of any believable female characters. There are certainly women present, but they are either stoic warriors, assassins, and mages (basically men in women's bodies), courtesans, or in one case, a young girl possessed by gods and turned into a killing machine. Except for one strong female lead, the mage Tattersail, there's no distinct female perspective to set the female characters apart from their male counterparts.

The other is that, as mentioned above, this isn't a fantasy novel that evokes any sense of wonder or awe. Plainly put, it chronicles a war. It's a dark and bloody book, full of battles and campaigns, complex attacks and counterattacks, Machiavellian plotting and intrigues. Gods appear, awesome magics abound, but it's all treated rather matter-of-factly. Its antecedents can be found in Robert E. Howard's Conan the Barbarian, rather than Lord Dunsany or other classic fantasists.

Which isn't to say that Erikson needs to treat his material differently. He's done a remarkable job of world-building and in describing the horrors and uncertainties of men caught up in the ravages of war. And there's no question that he's a strong writer, adept at characterization and capable of a real vigor in his prose. But by concentrating on the plot and character elements that he has, he's pretty much limiting his audience to boys and men fascinated with the business and heroics of war.

1632, by Eric Flint, Baen, 2000, $24.

There are a number of reasons for me to recommend this new novel by Eric Flint, not least of which is that it's a great story.

The setup is simple: on the wedding day of Mike Stearns's sister, attended by the entire membership

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of the local chapter of the United Mine Workers of America (who are led by Stearns), the town of Grantville, West Virginia, and a circle of its surrounding countryside is plucked from the year 2000 and dropped into northern Germany during the middle of the Thirty Years War. What follows is the story of how these West Virginians cope with their new situation, and it has the immediate appeal of Twain's classic *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* crossed with a war novel and a dash of a western movie.

In a time when cynicism rules most fiction, even genre, and the founding principles of the United States of America are pretty much considered a joke in too many quarters, it's refreshing and appealing to find a novel that tells a positive story and is willing to promote good, old-fashioned American values. And by those I mean the worth of an individual, the generosity to accept other races and religions at face-value, the willingness to help those in less fortunate straits, and the like. In other words, the ideals upon which the very idea of America was based.

And perhaps it works so well here because Flint has chosen to tell his story from the point of view of blue-collar workers — union men and women all. While they may be considered the "common people" by intellectuals and politicians, they are also the backbone of any country. These are the people who keep everything running, and while you might find rednecks and intolerant types among them, for the most part they are hardworking, community-oriented men and women who believe strongly in individual freedoms and rights, who will help a neighbor at the drop of a hat, and who will stand up and be counted whenever the going gets tough.

One of the things I enjoyed most about *1632* was how problems were solved by the good common sense and personal heroics of these ordinary people, rather than by some political or intellectual elite. There are no supermen in this book, though there are characters of extraordinary worth.

It's also interesting to note that while the novel certainly has its fair share of battles and war campaigns (the characters did end up in the middle of the Thirty Years War, after all, when Europe was torn apart by both), and the Americans defend themselves with ruthless gusto, the overall thrust of the novel is anti-war. Stearns, leading the Americans and their German allies, is

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always more concerned with how they can bring peace to the situation, even while having to defend themselves from armies of marauders and looters, and it's this that sets it apart from books like Erikson's *Gardens of the Moon* discussed above.

Where books like Erikson's appear to glory in the battles, Flint's characters are reluctant but effective defenders of their property and people, and always appear to be willing to explore other avenues before actually taking up arms. Mind you, when they do take up arms, they do so with the same single-minded vigor that they throw into the rest of their lives.

To be honest, I was less than enthralled with the actual battle scenes themselves, for all that I knew that they were necessary if the story was to be told with any honesty. I would rather have had a lot less detail on them, because I was far more taken with the ingenuity of the Americans in the face of overwhelming odds and how they looked ahead at how they needed to conserve their diminishing modern resources.

The characters are portrayed in broad sweeps as well, the good are brave and true, the villains despicable, and there's not much gray area in the makeup of any of them. Yet my interest in these people never lagged, especially in the relationships that formed between the modern, transplanted Americans and the native Europeans of the time. And if the characters are painted in broad strokes, Flint still allows for a great variety of political, religious, racial, and gender types.

But none of this makes for a boring or a bad book. Instead, it all comes together to pull the reader through, full steam ahead. The history (before it diverges from what we know) is well-researched, the ramifications of the situation are wonderfully thought through, and as I mentioned at the beginning of this review, at the heart of the book is just a fine, thoroughly engaging story about real people in an extraordinary situation.

The Wonderful Edison Time Machine, Malcolm Willits, Hypostyle Hall, 1999, $65.

I was amused by the hand-written note that was stuck to this book when it arrived in my P.O. box that read: "This is *not* a children's book."

It certainly looks like one. It's an oversize volume with large print and lots of wonderful black & white and

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color illustrations. And it reads a bit like a children's book as well, as four young boys from our time travel back to the 1920s to stop one of their ancestors from losing all his money, which left the present-day family broke. There are all sorts of improbable adventures in the past, and clever plot twists, written in a style that's part Mark Twain's *Connecticut Yankee* (sorry, there's that touchstone again) and part Tom Swift.

But it's a children's book from an earlier age, one that would appeal to a boy growing up in the '50s or '60s, or to the adults who were boys then, but not necessarily boys growing up today who might find it somewhat too old-fashioned. It's also terribly politically incorrect, from the boys' smoking cigars, drinking, and general carousing (which I took with a grain of salt — it is a story after all) to the hackneyed Fu Manchuian "yellow menace" of some of the villains, which I found rather unnecessarily offensive.

I understand that such villains existed in the pulp fiction of the earlier part of the last century, but Willits didn't need to use them here. It's not that I don't think that there can be evil Asians. There's good and bad in every race on this planet. It's the stereotypical representation of them that annoyed me, and will probably offend any Asian readers. And as they play such a small part in the book, I wonder why Willits even bothered with using them.

All of which is too bad, because otherwise this is an entertaining book, if a little one-note, and the production values are certainly stunning.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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BOOKS

ELIZABETH HAND

The Incompleat Nifft, by Michael Shea, Baen Books, 2000, $6.99.

Meet Me at Infinity, by James Tiptree, Jr., Tor Books, 2000, $25.95.

Mizora: A World of Women, by Mary E. Bradley Lane, University of Nebraska Press, 1999, $9.95.

"MONSTER MASH"

THESE ARE hard times for heroes. Oh, I don't mean Real-Life Heroes — you know, the people who find cures for cancer, save acreages of rain forest, donate bone marrow or time to aid the sick, the needy, the dispossessed, the poor. Real-Life Heroes may be in short supply, and they may be un- or under appreciated, but at least they still exist.

Real Heroes, on the other hand — and here I'll go by the *OED*, which defines hero as "A name given (as in Homer) to men of superhuman strength, courage, or ability, favoured by the gods" — seem to be a dying breed. Once upon a time they were everywhere, and unapologetically themselves: thick-thewed, matching swords and wits with each other, swearing By Crom! or The Crack! or For My Lady! They usually, though not always, traveled in pairs, one big loyal generally cheerful and enormously strong Lunk; one slighter, more agile sly and crafty Brain, often of a melancholy, even depressive temperament. They traveled a lot, and blood flowed copiously where'er they went, depending on whose god was favoring whom that day. Ladies found them attractive, and occasionally pal'ed around with them, and sometimes even became heroes (and occasionally heroines, with their very own series!) themselves — the Brain generally got the rapier-slender deceptively wistful-seeming girl, who often had a Secret yet Burning Need for Vengeance

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(family murdered by barbarians, early adolescence spent slaking the foul unspeakable needs of her captor, sort of thing). The Lunk paired off with her lusty, generally cheerful full-bosomed friend (with heroes, height is proportionate but intellect disproportionate to weight). They had names like Conan and Elak and Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser, Elric and Gorgik and St. Vier, Brak and Jirel and T'sais and Turjan and Severian. And sadly, of late, one doesn't read as much of them as in the elder days.

It's easy to see why. Rumors of steroid use plagued Conan from the very start; more than one hero has been accused of leman-beating. St. Vier and his companion were always fairly discreet about the exact nature of their partnership, and now run a successful martial arts/feng shui studio in Tribeca. (It's old news now, how Gorgik shocked everyone when he was accepted into the Sorbonne and did his dissertation on the influence Foucault had on St. Vier.) Jirel of Joiry has for several years acted as special consultant to *Xena: Warrior Princess*. And while Gray Mouser's bipolar tendencies have been assuaged by Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors, still one can't help feeling a sense of loss for the ecstatic swordplay that served as counterpoint to his dark moods. Severian, of course, trumped everyone and just became a god; but we all know how much fun *that* is.

So it was with glee close to greed that I opened Michael Shea's *The Incompleat Nifft*, a hefty omnibus that contains both the original linked stories that were published in 1982 as *Nifft the Lean*, and Shea's 1997 stand-alone novel *The Mines of Behemoth*. Shea first came to prominence in 1974 with *A Quest for Simbilis*, an authorized sequel to Jack Vance's *The Eyes of the Overworld*. Vance, of course, brought the sword-and-sorcery genre to some of its most sublime heights in *The Dying Earth* and *The Eyes of the Overworld*; his shadow falls beyond Shea to touch Gene Wolfe's *Book of the New Sun*, one of the last century's great novels.

The Nifft the Lean books have no such highbrow pretensions, but they make pretty great reading anyway. Shea does not wear Vance's influence lightly; even the names of his demons, "dimwebbers, meeps and ropy spaalgs," uncannily echo Vance's deodands and twk-men. But Shea's prose lacks the crystalline edge that gives even Vance's darkest tales a bright shimmer, the sense that if the Dying Earth is some

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mordant god's game, still it is a game.

The world inhabited by Nifft (the Brain) and his sidekick Barnar (the Lunk) is not a game. It is Evolution run amok, where "Kill or Be Eaten" is the prime directive and Nature is red not just in tooth and claw but tentacle, mandible, gaping maw and coiled stinging tail. Nifft and Barnar outwit, fight, and occasionally fuck other humans; but their real energy, and Shea's, is directed toward monsters.

And what monsters! Entire rippling, pullulating, creeping, swirling, crouching, leaping, swimming, slaughtering armies of them; enough monsters to populate a hundred novels, and untold nightmares. In his brief introduction to *The Mines of Behemoth*, Tim Powers (whose own early work treads deftly within the gleaming footsteps of Vance and Michael Moorcock) cites Bosch and Doré as worthy illustrators of Shea's hellish land- and creature-scapes.

But not even Bosch could capture the sheer, obsessive teemingness of Shea's world. That, I think, must be left to some outsider artist: a Henry Darger type, perhaps, drawn to microscopic animalcules rather than little girls with wings. Shea's depiction of monstrous things, with wings, multiple legs and mouths and heads, is extraordinary; its most remarkable execution is in *Nifft the Lean*'s centerpiece tale, "The Fishing of the Demon-Sea." At 144 pages, "Demon-Sea" is almost a novel in itself, an extended sojourn into a hellish subworld that exists beneath the primary world (and which itself exists above an even more hellish tertiary strata). Algis Budrys called Nifft and Barnar's descent into this subworld, via mineshaft and out through a vast cliff-face, "the best entry into Hell in all of literature," and yes, one suspects even Dante would be impressed.

> The tunnel issued from a stupendous wall of ragged bluffs, scarred by great landslides and stretching past vision to either side. The cliffs dropped sheer below us for nearly half a mile down to a zone of swampland, and all across the face of them the grey webbing spread, like a shroud crawling with grave-lice. For everywhere big multilegged shapes crouched in that dingy rigging, or ran along it with the incredible speed ants have on their own tiny scale. And other forms decorated the nasty

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weave — dangling bundles of webbing which stirred and twisted impotently against their anchorages. Vague though they were in their wrappings, we could see that many of these were winged things of a stature about twice that of a man, but the commonest food of the scorpion demons was themselves.

Suffice it to say that, from here on in and through the demon subworld, it only gets worse. A little of this goes a long way, and there is a lot of it in *Nifft the Lean.* So, beguiled as I was, it was with some apprehension that I began *The Mines of Behemoth,* fearing that a single novel featuring more of the same would collapse beneath the weight of all those twitching, thrashing mandibles.

Surprisingly, *The Mines of Behemoth* is stronger than any of the individual *Nifft* tales. It's a neat trope on the legend of the Midas Touch, or any of those folktales where magic (or animal husbandry) goes awry with dire consequences. Nifft and Barnar gird themselves to go underground again (Shea knows a good subworld when he sees it), this time confronting vastly echoing hives of immense gold-furred insects and taking apiary fantasy-horror to new heights — no mean task, since M. John Harrison's *A Storm of Wings* set a high standard for Bad Bees.

In their picaresque and unrelenting strangeness, Shea's tales evoke Jack Vance and Lord Dunsany, Clark Ashton Smith's *Zothique* tales, as well as *The Worm Ouroboros;* but what his work most reminds me of is David Lindsay's *A Voyage to Arcturus,* a book which had always struck me as being sui generis. Having read and delighted in *The Incompleat Nifft,* I must create a new category for this beautiful, terrifying work, part sword-and-sorcery, part season in hell. Call it Shea generis.

"Go Ask Alice"

There are monsters of a different sort in a few of the stories in *Meet Me at Infinity,* a compilation of previously uncollected fiction, travel essays, letters, and ruminations by the writer variously known as James Tiptree, Jr., Raccoona Sheldon, Alice Bradley, Alice Davey, and Alice Sheldon. It was as Tiptree, of course, that Alice Sheldon created her most memorable and highly regarded fiction, including some of the most chilling

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science fiction stories ever written — "The Last Flight of Doctor Ain," "Love Is the Plan, the Plan Is Death," "The Women Men Don't See," "The Screwfly Solution."

Sadly, except for "The Color of Neanderthal Eyes" (published posthumously in this magazine, in 1988), none of the stories in *Meet Me at Infinity* match those tales; but Tiptree's greatest work set such a high standard, it's difficult to see how they could. *Meet Me at Infinity* functions best as a sort of commonplace book of Alice Sheldon's work, featuring most of her public nonfiction, including many pieces originally published in fanzines. Jeffrey D. Smith, who annotated *Meet Me at Infinity*, published several of these fanzines. It's to his credit that he both assembled this mass of stuff, and provided comments by Sheldon/Tiptree herself on much of it, in the form of replies to editors, reactions to rejection letters, etc. (Most poignant are the proposals and letters that show us Sheldon's unsuccessful bids to write for *Star Trek;* if only she'd lived to see *Voyager* and *Deep Space Nine,* with their complex women and aliens!) The result is a glimpse, tantalizing as it is unsettling, into the soul of an intense, often brilliant writer haunted by depressive illness, whose prolific output seems as driven by obsession as by the sense that, from an early age, Alice Sheldon could hear the steady ticking of her Life-Clock counting down to zero.

Much of Tiptree's work made manifest Walt Kelly's pronouncement "We have met the enemy, and he is us" — usually Him. *Mizora, A World of Women,* gives us a kinder, gentler future, a feminist utopia the more remarkable because it was first published as a serial in 1880-81. Very little seems to be known about its author, Mary Bradley Lane, though she and Sheldon share certain speculative interests. *Mizora*'s protagonist, Vera, is a Russian woman who makes a successful journey to the center of the Earth —

> It is impossible to describe the feeling that took possession of me as months rolled by, and I saw the active employments of a prosperous people move smoothly and quietly along in the absence of masculine intelligence and wisdom...I saw hundreds of children — and all of them were girls. Is it to be wondered at that the first inquiry I made, was:
>
> "Where are the men?"

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Like most utopian fiction, *Mizora* earns more points for socio-political prognostication than for entertainment value. Still, like Vera, one develops a real respect for Mizora's inhabitants —

> The cream prepared artificially that I had tasted in London, was the same color and consistency as natural cream, but it lacked its relish. The cream manufactured in Mizora was a perfect imitation of the finest dairy product.
>
> It was the same with meats; they combined the elements, and the article produced possessed no detrimental flavor. It was a more economical way of obtaining meat than by fattening animals.

There you have it: Orwell may have given us Big Brother, and Huxley the Feelies; but it took a woman to predict vegan hamburgers and Olestra.

And finally, kudos to Four Walls Eight Windows, which has just reprinted Kem Nunn's classic 1985 surfpunk-noir cult-novel *Tapping the Source*. While not a genre novel per se (though there is a strong sulphurous reek of the occult in its final pages), *Tapping the Source* — a heady, headbanging blend of Robert Stone, "Heart of Darkness," and the Dead Kennedys — influenced genre writers like Richard Grant *(Through the Heart)* and Lewis Shiner *(Slam)*. Nunn has written several other novels, including the Roswell-noir caper *Unassigned Territories*, but *Tapping the Source* remains his best work, and it's still inexplicable to me that no one has filmed it. Quentin Tarantino, call your agent.

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One of our most prolific contributors for the past decade, Dale Bailey tends to write lush and moody stories that recognize the extraordinary qualities of everyday life and ordinary folks. Here's a tale from the home front that exemplifies those very traits.

Heat

By Dale Bailey

ALL SUMMER USHER'S WELL burned with the war fever, an almost visible heat that hung in a dry haze over the high ridges and permeated the pores and hearts of the town's every inhabitant. You could not escape the war that summer. It issued in blistering radio tirades — Normandy and Saipan — from the airless High Street parlors of the town's gentry, and enveloped in sweltering debate the veterans of the *last* war as they hunkered over beer in the dim recesses of the VFW.

Mrs. Millhauser, who didn't drink beer, could think of nothing but the war. It awaited her in her living room, where Frank lingered by the radio in stony silence. It confronted her at Young's Grocery, where she fumbled in her ration booklets to purchase coffee, sugar, flour. Most of all, it turned its hateful face to her in the post office, where she waited for Tom's letters to fill an aching void like the place where a tooth has been. His letters were fragmentary and stoically homesick, scissored to lacunae of dread by military censors. As Mrs. Millhauser walked home, clutching the mutilated blue pages to her breast, the war seemed to emanate in

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waves from the sidewalks and streets. She could feel it, a damp trickle of perspiration between her shoulder blades.

It was hot like that all summer. Grass withered. Birds fell into parched silence. Passing cars stirred clouds of dust that took hours to settle. Mrs. Millhauser couldn't sleep, and when she did sleep she drifted into languid dreams of Tom as a boy, appearing out of the shadows every evening as he walked home from the Five and Dime, where he tended counter after school. In the dreams she stepped out on the porch to greet him, but something always held her back, an invisible wall of heat.

Afternoons, Frank walked downtown for the late papers. One day Mrs. Millhauser waited on the porch with a glass of ice tea.

"Hot," she said, holding the glass to her forehead when he returned.

Frank nodded, shaking loose a fresh cigarette. Heat flickered in Mrs. Millhauser's breast: even that had changed, the trademark green carton bleached white. Lucky Strike had gone to war.

Frank exhaled a gray plume. The lines around his mouth deepened as he started up the steps, and something flinched inside of Mrs. Millhauser as well; it hurt her, the way the leg hurt him, and the way he endured it, silently, day after day. It was the way he endured everything, in silence: the leg, the war, Tom's absence. Something in Mrs. Millhauser cried out for voice.

"Frank," she said. "Do you ever think of — "

But she could not say it, the boy's name —

— *Tom* —

Saying it might invoke the doom she dreaded.

"Think of what, Lil?"

"Nothing. Forget it."

He grunted. "Reckon I'll have a look at the papers."

The screen door closed behind him.

The heat broke the next day. Mrs. Millhauser woke up chilled and reached out to turn off the fan on the bureau. For a moment, she thought she must have touched the wrong switch. The sound of the fan went on and on, an electric hiss louder than the sound of Frank breathing beside her or the rumble of a car down the street. And then she realized that it wasn't the fan she was hearing, after all, but the sizzle of rain on the slate roof. She watched the rain come down, a gray drizzle that had a look of

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permanence to it; she luxuriated in the smell of it through the open window — a damp, earthy, *living* smell, like the smell of root cellars or fresh compost.

The rain wore itself out that afternoon, but the day remained cool. Mrs. Millhauser stepped outside for a breath of air before dinner. Across the street, the Widow Baumgarten scrubbed mercilessly at her windows; as the sun slipped under the far horizon, fireflies began to light their candles. Children gave shrieking pursuit. From far down the shadowy street footsteps drew near.

Mrs. Millhauser felt time slip around her, years fall away. For a moment she almost believed that she had dreamed it all — the war, the endless burning summer, the air-raid sirens as they wailed out like bereft parents, plunging the town into darkness. She stepped out onto the sidewalk and peered down the street, her heart seizing up as a familiar shape gathered substance from the shadows under an old oak.

"Tommy?" she whispered.

He moved closer, into the bright spectral pool beneath a streetlight, not the boy she had half-expected, home from the Five and Dime, but a man in an olive drab uniform, smiling a sad half-uncertain smile.

Mrs. Millhauser shrieked. "Frank!" she called in a kind of panic. "He's home! Tom's come home!"

Mrs. Millhauser moved to embrace him, but he stepped away, a strange expression on his face. And so she only looked at him, the tall, lean boy who had sprouted somehow — overnight — from the child she had nursed at her breast. Now, the boy too had disappeared. Oh, he looked the same. He had the same long bony face and the same crooked nose, the lean body he had gotten from his father. But a certain hard-won wisdom peered out from his gray eyes. As a child, he had put her in mind of the sweet, laughing boy she had married; now, he reminded her of the grim and limping stranger who had come back to her from Europe all those years ago.

"Tommy, you're all grown up," she whispered.

Just then the screen door opened and Frank stepped onto the porch.

"What are you hollerin about, Lil?" he asked. Then he caught sight of the boy. "I'll be damned," he said.

* * *

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"Mark my words," Frank was saying, "Hitler's whipped. The real problem is Stalin. You wait and see."

After dinner, they sat invisible from the street beneath the cool overhang of the front porch. The men sipped Pabst Blue Ribbon from bottles so cold that tiny diamonds of ice clung to the long necks. Mrs. Millhauser sat in the swing, studying the boy's shadowy profile.

"Hell of a thing," Frank said, "the way McNair died. What did the boys think about that?"

"Not much. We didn't think much about that." It was the kind of answer he had given over the meal.

"Important man like that, I'd think the troops'd be all worked up. Lieutenant General, wasn't he?"

"Lots of men die, Dad. Every day they die."

Frank grunted. After a time, he said, "You want to walk down the VFW? Bill and them, they'd love to talk to you, you know."

Tom shrugged.

Frank lifted a Lucky Strike to his mouth. "What do you think, then? The VFW?"

"Later, maybe."

"Well," Frank said, "it's late anyway." The bobbing ember of his cigarette flared and died away; shadows welled up and retreated in the hollows under his eyes. It gave Mrs. Millhauser chills to see them together, father and son, like one of those odd time-lapse snippets of film, a vision of the future, her child as he would look when he grew old.

Shuddering, she glanced away. Across the street, Mrs. Baumgarten bustled about with a watercan in the near dark. She had lost her husband in the first war, her son in the Pacific; now she lived alone and her house had the stark glossy sheen of a museum. Everything — her furniture, the company dishes in her corner cabinet, her hardwood floors — glowed. Even her flowers had survived the long summer; she had nursed them right through, long after Mrs. Millhauser's had succumbed to neglect and worry and thirst.

To heat.

"Why don't you say hi to the widow, Tom?" she said. "She asks about you. Every day she asks about you."

"Later, Ma."

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"Well, she's right there. It's not so much to ask, is it?"

Frank stubbed his cigarette out in the ashtray. "Your mother wrote you about Mrs. Baumgarten's boy, Joe, didn't she? There on the beach at Guadalcanal?"

"I know."

"Why don't you say hi to her, Tom?"

"No! Not now! I don't want to go to the VFW and I don't want to talk to her!" And softer: "Not tonight, you hear?" Tom stood, leaving his beer by his chair. He stood between them, his head lowered. "I'm sorry," he said after a moment. "I'm tired. I'm just very tired." He sighed, hesitated as though he wanted to say something else, and turned away. The screen banged closed behind him. Mrs. Millhauser listened to his feet on the stairs.

A sliver of moon hung over the town. Mrs. Baumgarten had gone inside. They sat there for a while, the street quiet, the windows in nearby houses dimly aglimmer, the town so peaceful you could forget almost that there was a war somewhere, half a world away. Except Mrs. Millhauser could never forget.

Sighing, she stood and collected the two bottles of beer, her husband's empty and the one Tom had left beside his chair, full and warm.

"Tommy didn't drink his beer," she said.

She sensed Frank shifting in the darkness, listening.

"He barely ate a bite at dinner. He just played with his food, and pork tenderloin always was his favorite."

The night flared red. Mrs. Millhauser stumbled back a step. Frank cradled a match at his face. Mrs. Millhauser stood there clutching the beer bottles and thinking of Tom, how odd he had been, and distant.

"Frank, something's not right about Tom. Something's not right."

"He's changed," Frank said.

She didn't like to think of that.

"Why's he home, Frank? No one else is home. Why Tom?"

A gust shook the oak tree outside his window and the room swarmed with shadow from the light by the sidewalk. Mrs. Millhauser stood watching him at the chest of drawers, his breath suspended, so still that his uniform melted into emerald shadow, like he was only halfway there.

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"Mother."

"I didn't want to bother you."

He turned. He had been looking at the trophies atop the chest, aglimmer with stolen light.

"You were always such a fine athlete."

He retreated to the window as she crossed the room. She lifted a trophy, all chrome and gold. Its coolness seemed to flow through her fingers, to take root and spread above her, like the canopy of some sheltering tree.

"Your father, he keeps them dusted for you, Tommy. You made him so proud."

"He never said so."

"It's hard for your father to say things. The time he spent in Europe, he never was the same after that."

Tom shifted suddenly like he wanted to say something.

Mrs. Millhauser waited.

She said, "He feels things, though. You've made him proud, being such a fine athlete, and volunteering to serve your country. You've made us both so proud."

Tom gazed out the window. He lifted his fingers to the glass. "I used to love this room."

"All we wanted was for you to be happy."

"Saturday mornings, I used to wake up real early with the sun shining through the leaves. It looked like coins, Ma, scattered all over the bed. I liked to lie there without getting up because of the way the sun fell right on that chest where I had my trophies, shining like they were gold." He laughed softly. "Just looking at them, I knew everything was going to work out for me the way I had always planned it."

She placed the trophy carefully atop the chest.

"Everything *is* going to work out. Now you're home — "

"I won't be home long, Ma."

"Your furlough won't last forever. But your father says we'll be in Berlin by spring. You'll be home for good this time next year."

Tom had opened the window. A breeze kissed her face and hands.

"Tommy — "

"Mrs. Baumgarten, how's she doing, Ma?"

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Mrs. Millhauser paused, abruptly breathless.

"Ma?"

"She took Joe's loss awful hard. He was everything in the world to her, all she had left."

"What's she do there all by herself?"

"Cleans mostly. She asks about you, Tom."

Silence.

"Tom," she said. "What's wrong with you, son? You didn't eat."

"Just wasn't hungry, I suppose."

"But your clothes. You didn't bring a suitcase or any clothes." She could feel panic rising in her, a parching premonitory wind. She fluttered her hands as if she could beat it back somehow.

"Just a short visit, Ma. I can't stay."

"Tom, Tom — "

"Ma, how come you never had any other children?"

"We just didn't, somehow," she said, and it was all she could do to force the words up the arid tunnel of her throat. "We just didn't," she said.

She said, "You're all we ever wanted."

"It's so nice to have him home, isn't it?" Mrs. Millhauser said.

They lay without touching as they had lain so many nights, Frank on his back and she here beside him, studying his profile in silhouette against the gray squares of the window on the street. Once, long ago, she had let her hand slip through his chest hair to the puckered scar where a bullet had gone in, just under the nipple. Frank had flinched away from her, gasping, and after that they lay side by side and did not touch.

"It's like old times when he was a boy," Mrs. Millhauser said, "sleeping down the hall like this."

Frank made a sound deep in his throat.

The air was cool, and smelled of distant rain. Frank liked to sleep with the window open, the sheer curtains billowing over the bed like ghosts. Mrs. Millhauser had put on a fall gown.

"I had the strangest feeling when I was in his bedroom," she said. "I kept thinking of a night years ago, he must have been ten years old. He couldn't have been older than that."

She turned to stare at the ceiling.

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"I couldn't sleep that night. But I thought I heard something, and I didn't want to wake you, you were so tired. So I just tiptoed to the window. Tommy's window was open and I thought he must have gotten hot and opened the window. And then I saw something in the oak tree and that's when I realized: the little rascal had taken it into his head to sneak out the window."

She laughed softly.

"Frank, I wish you could have seen him. I watched him climb all the way down that tree, and he didn't have the faintest idea I was there. I was going to wait until he got down and surprise him. I was going to ask him just what he thought he was doing. But then he got down and stood under the streetlight, looking back at the house, and — "

She paused, burdened with memory.

"There was something about his face, like he wanted to stay but he had to go, he just *had* to, something was calling to him. I don't know how to describe it. But I didn't have the heart to call him back. I couldn't somehow. And right then I knew what the hardest thing about being a parent would be: watching your children slip away, knowing they would and knowing there was nothing you could do to stop it."

Mrs. Millhauser lay still, thinking of the morning that had followed — how she had clutched Tom so fiercely that she could feel the intricate bones in his back, fragile as the bones of a bird; how she had pressed her face to his tousled hair and drawn in the scent of moonlit streets and wind.

"Now why would I think something like that?" she said. Her own voice shocked her into silence. It had a shrill note that seemed to set every molecule of air atremble. It scared her so that she didn't dare speak for a long time; she just lay there, listening to the sounds of the town, the creek whispering to itself and the plaintive song of the crickets and a train whistle testing the black air somewhere far away, the whole night quiring and the enormous weight of the sky bearing down and down until finally she could not endure it a moment longer, she had to speak, the words not so much produced of her own volition, as dragged from her to shatter the urgent chorus of the night.

"Frank," she said. "Frank — "

But there was only silence, the two of them staring blindly into dark.

* * *

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Mrs. Millhauser murmured in her sleep, dreaming of Tom.

The night was cool.

Outside a steady rain poured down.

SHE WOKE TO the corpse light that precedes dawn, knowing she would not sleep again. Her stomach knotted, her breath caught in her throat. She had felt this way on her wedding day, waking to air thick with impending change, a surrender and a sundering, a joining together.

Mrs. Millhauser stood quietly, belting her robe. In the queer light, Frank looked old, his skin gray. An impulse from some half-forgotten past rose up to claim her, and she hesitated, a hand outstretched to caress his face, softened by years and sleep —

She turned away.

Downstairs, she set coffee to brewing, and then she turned, brushing back the curtains over the front windows. At first she hardly recognized him out there, his uniform deliquescing in the green dark under the roofed-in porch, a shadow among shadows.

She eased the screen door closed and stood on the porch.

"Tom?"

"Morning, Ma."

"You're up early."

They sat on the steps in the close air.

The words surprised her, she said them so calmly. "I know, Tommy, I *know*. You come home without a change of clothes, you don't eat, you don't drink — and you think I don't know?"

"Don't, Ma. Please don't."

"Don't? *Don't*? What am I supposed to do? Act like nothing happened? Just go on? Clean twenty-four hours a day like that poor old woman across the street?"

He said nothing.

"Answer me, Tom! Answer me that, else why did you come here?"

Again, he said nothing. The silence stretched out like a sheet of unbroken glass, and then, in a small voice, she said, "How, Tom? How did it happen?"

"I got separated," he said. "I got separated from my platoon, Ma, and

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I was lost and confused. I was frightened, Ma. I was so scared. It was late and dark and there were stars, I'd never seen so many stars, and I came to a stream at the edge of a field. There were woods on the other side. I thought if I could just get a drink of fresh water I would feel better, I would go on into the woods and hide till dawn and I could find my way. I put down my rifle and got down on my knees to cup my hands in the water. He must have come down from the woods on the other side. I heard him, and I turned my head. I could tell from the look on his face that he was lost, too, that he was afraid. I never even reached for my rifle, Ma. I couldn't. I just stood up and he — he — "

"Okay," she said. "Okay."

She reached out and drew him close, and this time he allowed her to touch him. A terrible cold like no cold she had ever felt enclosed her, and yet she did not flinch from him. He did not return her embrace. He simply endured it for a moment, and then he would endure it no longer, and she released him.

"Okay, baby," she said. "Okay."

And then: "Why, Tom? Why did you come home?"

He didn't answer; he simply stared off into that strange blue light that separates the night and the day, his gaze fixed on a single light burning high up in the Widow's house.

He said, "She doesn't sleep, does she?"

"I look out sometimes before I close the curtains at night," Mrs. Millhauser said, "and that light, it's always on. Every morning, it's always burning. Nights must be hard for her. Days she keeps busy, but nights..."

She sighed and turned away, toward the ridges in the east, and the sky smudged pink from the rising sun.

Tom stood.

"I have to go, Ma," he said, and as if he had called it somehow, a long black Packard turned the corner and started slowly up the street toward them, its engine utterly silent. Tom stepped to the sidewalk to meet it.

"Stay, Tom. Do you have to go?"

The black car slid noiselessly to the curb. Staring at it, Mrs. Millhauser had a sense that it had come from nowhere, and that when it turned the far corner it would go back to the same place. It was glossy and long and so black that she could stare into it forever and never touch bottom. She

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looked up at Tom and then to the front seat of the car, where the driver waited, a black shadow beyond the mirrored glass, and for a single terrifying moment she felt certain he would turn his face to hers.

But he did not.

Tom opened the door.

"Why, Tom?"

"You needed me. You called to me."

"Tom, Tom — "

"You don't have to be alone," he said. He got in and closed the door. The car eased away from the curb and went down the long street and turned the corner and was gone.

Mrs. Millhauser watched it disappear and then she turned her gaze to the flat steely sky, the sun edging over the far ridges. A trickle of perspiration slid down her spine and Mrs. Millhauser bent forward to cradle her face in her hands.

The day promised heat.

How long she sat like that she did not know, but the puddled rain had begun to steam away when finally she stood. In the kitchen, the aroma of the coffee greeted her, and she reached out with fingers tremulous and grown suddenly old to lift a mug from its peg. She poured the coffee and sat at the kitchen table and wondered how she would get through this day and the one to follow, and what she would feel when the telegram came to her door at last.

And what kind of way was that to say good-bye? she thought. *You don't have to be alone*?

Mrs. Millhauser folded her arms and rested her head on them, the room airless, the town sleeping, only she and the Widow Baumgarten awake in their empty kitchens, the silence so encompassing that she could hear the *plink* of each water droplet from the leaky faucet Frank somehow never got around to fixing.

But he would. She would ask him again, and he would.

He would.

The thought lingered in her mind a moment. Then Mrs. Millhauser stood, pushing the coffee aside. She went up the stairs and passed the empty bedroom with the trophies on the dresser, shining like gold. She

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went into the bedroom where Frank lay very still in the shadows, the sheer curtains hanging straight in the windless morning. Her nightgown clung to her when she shucked off her robe, the room was so hot. Before she crawled into bed, she reached out and turned on the fan.

She lay there for a long moment, feeling the cool air drying the perspiration on her body, thinking of Frank. At last, hesitant, her hand sought his across the sheets, and found it. His fingers closed over hers, stronger than she had imagined for all these years.

"I'm here," he said. "I'm right here, Lil."

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Mark Tiedemann recently published his first novel, Mirage *(a new story in Isaac Asimov's Robot series), and he is working on a sequel. In addition, it appears that his science fiction novel* Compass Reach *will be coming out in 2001. Here he gives us a tale of strange bedfellows to mark this election year.*

Politics

By Mark W. Tiedemann

GLEN CINCHED THE KNOT on his tie and looked over his shoulder at Ray, who sprawled on the sofa with a magazine open on his lap.

"You're sure you won't come?" Glen asked.

Ray glanced up. "To the party? You know better."

Glen shrugged. "You're always on my case about not telling my mother. I thought — "

"You thought just showing up with me would be good enough. That she'd get the idea and you wouldn't actually have to say the words." Ray shook his head. "Problem is, you still wouldn't be telling her. I would."

Glen drew and held a deep breath. He stared at Ray until the other man looked up.

"Am I wrong?" asked Ray.

"I'm just trying to get along with people."

"No, you're not. Besides, that's not getting along. It's giving in."

"You know, you're not helping very much."

"What can I do? You're the one who wants what you can't have."

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"What does that mean?"

Ray rolled his eyes. "You want to be who you are and have all those nice things your mother has to offer at the same time. You won't tell her because you can't turn your back on the bright lights and prestige."

"And money," Glen said acidly. "Let's not forget the money."

"I never forget the money." He raised the magazine again.

Glen shook his head, sighed. "I'll try not to be late."

"Don't worry about it. I might go out later."

Glen hesitated. He wanted to ask where and why. Instead he said, "Well, don't be too late. If I get back first I'll wait up."

Ray raised his eyebrows and waggled his fingers over the top of the magazine. When he remained silent, Glen left the hotel.

At least the rain has ended, he thought as he stepped into the early night air. The streets glistened darkly and the cars *swished* as they went by. The cab was waiting and, mercifully, the driver was not talkative.

The house was a long drive from downtown. Glen ran through the possible outcomes of the evening, trying to anticipate. Even so, when the cab pulled into the driveway and he saw all the cars parked around the circle, spilling onto the lawn like a rich child's notion of a junkyard, Glen felt himself tense. It looked so much like so many nights when he was a child and lived here and thought naïvely that his parents simply had a lot of friends who enjoyed their company and dressed well. That was before his father's nervous breakdown, before Glen's own awareness of his differences, before he understood that his parents — especially his mother — served a function for all these strangers.

The windows in the Hollywood-style three-story Edwardian manse glowed cheerily. Glen paid the fare and walked up the wide path to the broad double doors, which were flanked by two earnest young men wearing earplugs. He was asked for his invitation — for him and a guest — and his name was checked off a list. Glen considered leaving at once, but the cab had already pulled away.

One of the security guards opened the door for him.

Glen stepped into the foyer and immediately looked up the wide staircase. A smile tugged at his mouth. He wondered if he might get a chance to sneak up to the attic. Not all his memories of this place were bad....

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"May I take your coat, sir?"

He automatically handed his raincoat to a servant, then peered into the great room. The ceiling beams and cherrywood paneling worked at a kind of warmth and old English coziness, but against all that space, peopled with well-dressed, close-spoken guests, each with an arm crooked in cocktail posture, the impression was just large and dark. A few faces turned toward him, smiling politely, but Glen recognized no one. It disappointed him how little the scene had changed over the years. He tugged absently at his cuffs and smoothed his jacket. Another minute, he thought, and I find a phone and —

"Harold."

Agnes, his mother, separated from the mosaic and came toward him. She seemed to be the only one without a drink. She had shortened her chestnut hair since last year, put on a few pounds, but otherwise looked much the same as always. Glen thought of his mother as stuck in time, fixed at an age somewhere between thirty and fifty, depending on her mood. She smiled and held out her hands to him. He took them and leaned forward to accept her kiss.

"Harold, I'm so glad you came — or is it still Glen? Frankly I'll never get used to that." She made a show of looking past him. "Alone?"

"It's hard to pick up a date when you're only in town for a few days."

"You should have called. I know a few people, after all."

"Then I'd have to spend time with my date and not you."

She made a puffing sound and playfully slapped his shoulder. "Come on, Harold, I want you to meet some people."

She took his arm and led him into the gathering. "Harold, I'd like you to meet Senator Cramer...."

"Glen, please," Glen said, shaking the senator's bony hand.

"Pleased to meet you. Tell me, what do you think of your mother?"

"Well...she's my mother. I think the world of her, of course."

The senator laughed lightly. "Doesn't he know, Agnes?"

"Know what?"

"Shush, Clive, you'll spoil the surprise," Agnes said.

"Didn't mean to spill the beans," Senator Cramer said.

"Just whetted his curiosity, Clive, don't worry."

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She guided him off.

"What's going on?" Glen asked.

"There'll be an announcement later...oh, Congressman Fennerly! I'd like you to meet my son, Harold...."

Finally, Agnes was called away to tend to something and she left him in a small group of lobbyists. Glen excused himself and wandered off, grateful for the reprieve. It amazed him sometimes that he had once found this menagerie fun. His child's imagination had made it into something else then. When had reality eroded his ability to do that? Somewhere along the way from childhood to now a door had closed, leaving him on one side. He wondered why he could not have been left on the other side. But then he might end up like his father, banished to an institution until he died, locked in a world that no longer jibed with reality. How bad could that be, though, given the alternatives?

He took a drink from a wandering tray and found a spot by one of the tall windows that seemed unnoticed by anyone else. He sipped the expensive whiskey and observed that it had begun to rain again.

If Ray had come along then perhaps he could have left already....

"Glen?"

He looked around, startled. A young woman stood there, smiling expectantly. He started to beg her pardon, then hesitated.

"Sophi?" He felt himself grin and opened his arms. She stepped into a quick, familiar hug. "Good lord, it's good to see you!"

"You looked a little dazed."

"Overwhelmed, actually. Is there anyone here not connected to the Party?"

"If not, then they're connected with the *other* party."

Glen shook his head. "What's going on? I haven't seen a gathering of the potentates like this since..."

She raised an eyebrow. "Since the last time Agnes ran for office?"

Glen groaned. "She isn't."

"You really didn't know?"

"Politics is not high on my list. She didn't say anything in her last three dozen phone calls." He looked at her. "It's been what? Six years?"

"My college graduation. What have you been doing?"

"Mr. Peripatetic. I work for Stanfield-Grunnan, consulting. They

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manage to send me to at least one new city a year. Right now I'm living in Albuquerque."

"Sounds fun. You always wanted to travel. Though I imagine the trade-off could be unpleasant."

"Lots of trade-offs. Never the same junk mail, I'm not bothered with phone-calls from roofing contractors, and my intestinal flora is constantly challenged. Which one did you have in mind?"

Sophi stifled a laugh, shaking her head. "Same Glen. None of the above. Living alone would bother me."

"I have someone."

She blinked, surprised. "Oh?"

Glen felt himself grow defensive. "And you?"

"No one. Not currently, anyway."

"Have you asked Agnes? She claims to know a few people."

Sophi laughed again and Glen felt relieved.

"So why are you here?" he asked. "Don't tell me you're involved in all this nonsense."

"As a matter of fact, I'm here with my uncle. I'm visiting the ancestral manse for a few weeks and he talked me into coming. Vague promises about having a surprise in store. Also, I've been invited to help with Agnes's campaign."

"You're considering it?"

She shrugged. "A good way to meet people."

"Yes, but not a way to meet good people. I can't believe she's running again. I thought she learned her lesson after the last time."

"There's a good chance she can win. The mood of the country is different. It *has* been several years, after all, and people have notoriously short political memories."

Sophi did not mention Glen's father, though they both knew that was what she meant. His embarrassing breakdown had cost Agnes a senate seat.

"Hmm. Well, it seems she's invited me here under false pretenses. I might call it an early evening."

"Oh, don't. I won't have anyone to talk to."

"We could both slip out unnoticed and go somewhere for dinner. I think I'd like catching up."

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Sophi pursed her lips thoughtfully, then nodded. "Let me see about transportation. An escape to the woods sounds like just what the shrink prescribed."

Glen laughed and she smiled brightly. She squeezed his hand and left, winding her way through the clusters of guests.

An escape to the woods...he had almost forgotten the game. They had grown up together; her family had lived on the neighboring estate for nearly five generations, and Glen would be the third generation to live in this house if he chose to keep it after Agnes passed on. Sophi and he had created endless play scenarios, but their favorite had been this one. Stuck with chores, homework, or in one of Agnes's social affairs, they pretended to be prisoners in a castle. There would be elaborate planning and finally, at the strategic moment, the break for freedom. They would hide "in the woods" then until it was time to go home, go to bed, or they were found. The "woods" could be anywhere, but often they ended up in the attic, where they would huddle and confabulate stories together...sometimes it had seemed so real that Glen could not afterward remember where they had really been. Even now, thinking back, instead of the dark corners packed with old suitcases and boxes of discarded clothes or pictures or tableware, he recalled a lush meadow, tall trees, sunlight splintered through high branches —

"Harold."

Agnes appeared in front of him, reaching for his arm. Surprised, Glen jerked back. Whiskey sloshed over his hand.

"Oh, hell," Agnes said. From somewhere she produced a napkin. She deftly took his glass and draped the white linen over his wet hand. "There, dry that off. There's someone here I'd like you to meet."

"Have mercy. I've met damn near everyone here."

"Just one more and I won't bother you for the rest of the evening."

"Promise?" He worked the napkin. "I should go wash. I'll smell like a distillery all night."

"Later."

Agnes took him in tow and Glen felt his patience fray. He slipped from her grasp. She gave him a startled look.

"I can manage to walk unassisted," he said.

"Honestly, Harold, I don't know what's wrong with you."

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He opened his mouth to tell her, then stopped himself. He always stopped himself. Running away, escaping to the woods, was easier than simply telling her that he hated being managed. Agnes had always managed him. Straightened his clothes, combed his hair, wiped his face, directed his movements in public, told him what to say, chose his friends, held him in place when she thought he might run off. He had always hated it and he hated it still, but even still he said nothing. Not the time, he thought, looking around at her guests.

He followed her across the hall from the great room to the library. He looked around for Sophi but did not see her. Agnes knocked lightly on the door, gave Glen a smile, and entered.

A fire crackled in the hearth; its light, diluted by the glow of the track lights that shined on the shelves of books, flickered about the room. Glen paused at the door. He did not remember the library being this large. Nor did he recall the fireplace.

"Harold?"

"Uh, sorry." He closed the door behind him. "When did you change this around?" He gestured at the hearth. Maybe, he thought, I just never saw it used.

A man stood by one of the cases. He slid a leatherbound book back in its place and turned toward Glen. Agnes waited to one side, hands clasped loosely at waist level.

As Glen drew closer, the man looked familiar. Straight posture, slight backward tilt of his head, broad shoulders — he appeared taller than he was. He might have been fifty, sixty, or a robust seventy. He seemed familiar.

"Harold," Agnes said quietly. "I'd like you to meet James Travis. James, my son, Harold."

Glen extended his hand and spared his mother a quick glare. "Glen, please, Mr. Travis. I haven't gone by Harold since high school. Agnes keeps forgetting."

"I sympathize," James Travis said. His voice grated slightly, like sand underfoot. "My given name is Seamus." He took Glen's hand. The grip was strong, brief, dry.

Glen looked at him. "*The* James Travis?"

"Is there another?"

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"Probably not...." Glen looked at his mother.

"Well, I'll leave you two to talk," she said and patted Glen's shoulder. "I have shmoozing to do."

"Don't overdo it, Agnes," Travis said. "You've already sold them."

Glen watched his mother leave.

"A drink?"

Travis had crossed the room to a sidebar. He held a decanter half filled with dark liquid.

"Thank you," Glen said. "So you're the man who keeps the Party running."

"That's a bit broad." He brought a glass to Glen. "It takes a lot of people to run a party."

"But without you they'd be a disorganized bunch of amateurs. Like they used to be. James Travis is the organizer, fund raiser, last court of appeal on policy."

"You disapprove?"

"Well, you're not an elected official, Mr. Travis. It does bother me that someone like you has the power you seem to have."

"Direct. I see why Agnes thinks so highly of you."

"Does she? That's news."

"I thought, though, that you were apolitical."

"As much as possible. But some things even a political misanthrope like me hears about. I understand Agnes is running for office again. Was that your idea?"

"Have you always used your mother's first name like that?"

"Excuse me?"

Travis smiled and shrugged. "Forgive me. I'm a bit of a throwback. Children in my day always called parents Mother or Father, Mom or Dad — "

"Ma or Pa? I'm not a child, Mr. Travis. And Agnes has never really objected."

"Perhaps you might consider changing that."

Glen blinked. "Why?"

"For the duration of the campaign, at least. It wouldn't do to have you calling her 'Agnes' at public functions or press meetings, that sort of thing."

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Glen laughed. "What office do you have her running for?"

"Governor, actually."

"Really. Do you think she has a chance?"

"We wouldn't be here tonight if we didn't. She certainly has the nomination of the Party. The Mansion itself...that's a little more complicated, certainly, but if everyone is reasonable I don't see an obstacle. It's one of the reasons you and I are talking."

"I'm not political." Glen set the glass down and prepared to leave.

"Of course you are. Everyone's political. Especially someone like you."

"Someone like me?"

"Someone who chooses to live at odds with expectations. On the fringes, as it were, apart. Even declaring yourself apolitical makes you political, says you have an idea of what it means to *be* political. You have to know what it is that you're not to be able to claim opposition. A few moments ago you expressed your disapproval of me, my position in the Party. That's political."

"That's personal."

"Of course it is."

"It's a matter of ethics."

"Morality, even?"

Glen wanted to walk away. He looked at Travis's eyes — not into them, there was a hardness about them that did not permit access — and wondered why he did not move.

"Why *are* we talking?" he asked. His voice sounded distant to him, as if coming from the far end of the room.

Travis took a drink and turned away. Glen took a step back and felt chilled.

"Agnes asked a favor," Travis said. He sat down in one of the leather chairs by the hearth and extended a hand toward the flames. For a moment, it seemed to Glen that the fire moved closer to Travis, that a few loose tongues leapt out and twined themselves around his fingers. Glen closed his eyes and looked again and saw only a man holding his hand out to the fire, which behaved like fire. "Sit down, Glen."

Glen eased into the opposite chair.

"You're nearly thirty," Travis said, "and you've never married."

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"No."

"Your mother wants grandchildren, Glen. Certainly we wouldn't mind that. The Party is family oriented. A happy family would be useful."

Glen stood. "I don't think we know each other that well, Mr. Travis."

"James, please."

"Agnes asked you to talk to me about grandchildren?"

"She didn't want to bring it up so baldly — "

"Bullshit. She's brought it up before, baldly and otherwise."

"Then why haven't you done as she asked?"

Glen stared at the man, stunned. "This is a personal issue that doesn't concern you."

"It does, though. The Party supports those who serve it. Agnes has devoted herself to us. In return we're prepared to offer certain benefits. Appreciations, you might say. We're prepared to make the same offer to you, in return for certain cooperations." The man gave Glen a look of uncomplicated sincerity.

"You want to bribe me to get married and produce offspring? Isn't that a bit medieval?"

"Depends how you characterize it. Nothing unusual about it, not even in this day and age. I frankly told her she should ask for something else, but she insisted, and we're good for our word. As I said, it would be useful in future campaigns. We might even get some use out of it in this one if you agreed and arrangements were made quickly enough."

Glen felt lightheaded. "I suppose you've already selected a suitable candidate for my progeny?"

"There is someone that wouldn't be averse to the idea, but that's entirely up to you and her. We haven't broached the subject with her yet — "

"Mr. Travis — "

"James, please."

" — I'm gay."

"I know."

Glen's ears warmed and the heat rolled down his shoulders, cooling as it reached the small of his back. "Then..."

"We're not insensitive, Glen. Nor impatient. We'll help you."

"I — have to go, Mr. Travis. This has been a really...unique conversation, but — "

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"We'll talk more, Glen. Later."

Glen laughed nervously, shook his head, and hurried to the door. He felt a tingling across his back and expected to be stopped. He opened the door and stepped out into the hall with a wash of relief.

"Glen, there you are." Sophi came up to him, her coat draped over one arm. "I thought you'd run off without me." She stopped close to him and frowned. "Are you all right? You're pale."

"Fine, I...I really need an escape to the woods."

Sophi nodded and touched his arm. Glen felt warm, slightly feverish. Sophi looked into the great room, then took his hand.

"Come on."

He let her lead him up the stairs, to the second floor. When they mounted the narrower stair to the third floor he began to feel something familiar. He glanced back, anxious to see if anyone followed.

The stair to the attic was in an enormous closet at the far end of the hallway. As children they had had to attach an extra cord to the rope. The cord still hung down and Sophi yanked it eagerly. The stair descended with a thud that sounded much too loud and caused them both to stifle laughter as they ran up into the dark attic.

Glen knelt at the top and pulled on the spring-loaded cable. The stair swung back up into place and left them in complete darkness.

"Now maybe..." Sophi said. Glen heard soft rustlings as she moved somewhere behind him. "Ah."

Suddenly a wan yellow light lanced out to the wall. Even as he watched, it faded. But it lasted long enough for Sophi to reach the wall switch. Glen saw the old greenish boy scout flashlight in her hand.

"Good lord," he breathed. The bare bulbs attached to the cross beams burned a dusty off-white, as if instead of casting light they plated the space with ivory. Boxes lined the left side, three and four deep and piled to the rafters. An ancient, once-red carpet traced a path straight back between trunks, old furniture, piles of magazines, and forgotten shapeless masses. Glen walked halfway down the narrow aisle and stopped at the skinny access to an open space to the left.

He squeezed between the stacked boxes and the black steamer trunk and stood in the center of the irregular circle. A broad sheet of paneling lay atop the pile to his right.

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Sophi's hands pushed down on his shoulders. He looked at her and laughed and she pressed harder, till he dropped to his knees. He scooted back against shopping bags stuffed with drapes and old clothes and watched her detach one of the light fixtures. She pulled the paneling forward and slid the electric cord into a slot cut in one side of the sheet. Then she pulled the whole thing across the top of the space, ducking down beneath it, and shoving it in place to cover them completely. The lightbulb hung a few inches below the panel and filled the area with sharp light.

Blankets were folded against the wall of bags.

"I'd almost forgotten," Glen admitted. "Of course, it seemed a lot larger — "

"Twenty years ago?" She nodded. "Maybe if we use our imaginations it'll get bigger again."

"Twenty years...we haven't been up here since..."

"To be precise, seventeen years ago. We were twelve. That was the last time."

"And you left."

She nodded. "Off to school. Not the most thrilling time of my life."

"I forgot how much I missed you."

"I used to daydream about this place. And Avalon and Granada and Helium — "

Glen laughed, slapping his knee. "All the places we pretended to visit. God, there were a lot of them."

"Pretended," Sophi said with mock-indignation. "I'll have you know they were all very real. I asked my uncle to let us visit them and he said all right." She shook her head sadly. "It never worked anywhere else."

"Uh huh."

She threw her coat at him and he brushed it aside. She grinned. "True. Every word."

"I believe you."

He leaned his head back. The air smelled musty, old paper and humidity. Amazing, he thought, what the raw material of imagination can turn out to be.

"Thank you," he said. "I'm feeling better."

"Good."

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The brightness against his closed eyelids vanished. He opened his eyes and strained to see in the sudden dark.

"What — ?"

"Where would you like to visit? Camelot? Atlantis?"

"I don't — " He stopped himself. He almost said he did not want to visit anywhere, did not want to be a child again. But really he just did not want the illusions he remembered to be banished by adult constraints. Would the admission that he no longer believed hurt Sophi's feelings? He did not think so, but he was too grateful for the escape to risk it. He closed his eyes again. "You pick."

"All right."

He heard rustling, then felt a touch of breeze on his face. Something tickled his nose. Sophi and he used to draw poster board illustrations of the places they had "visited" and used them here, propped against the walls of the enclosure, to enhance the experience. Glen wondered if they still existed anywhere or if they had long since been thrown out or rotted.

They had a ritual, an incantation, for entering their various realms, and another for leaving. Sophi had come up with them, he had never been very good at concocting details like that. All very mysterious and significant in a child's way. He thought he heard Sophi muttering quietly, rhythmically. He could not remember the words, though....

"How's this?"

Glen looked. Sophi seemed to be a vague outline in the dark. He blinked. She was further away than before, he could see — *thought* he could see — all of her, standing, leaning back against a column of some kind.

He put his hands on the floor to push himself up straighter. He jerked his hands up, off the icy marble.

"I wasn't sure it would still work," she said, her voice echoing slightly. "I used to think about what we might have done had we stayed neighbors. My uncle sent me off to school just when things might've gotten interesting."

She was close now. Glen felt her hand on his face and he tensed. Beyond the outline of her head the room seemed to extend up, toward pointed arches of stone. He smelled her breath.

"I missed you, Glen," she said.

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Then she kissed him. Her tongue prodded at his lips.

He snatched her hand and drew his head back.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Making a suggestion."

"Sophi — "

"Don't worry, I won't let it spoil our friendship." She wriggled her hand free and he felt her fingernails trace down his chest, his belly, stop to work at his pants.

He drew his legs up and caught hold of her hands again.

"What?" she said.

"Sophi, you don't understand." She waited. He heard her breathing, deep, steady, controlled. He moaned — for a moment he considered going along with her, just to avoid the issue, do exactly what Ray was always accusing him of doing, though never to this degree — and turned away from her. "I'm gay."

After several seconds she moved away. "Well, shit," she murmured. "So I suppose the someone else is..."

"His name is Ray."

"You didn't bring him tonight."

"Not for lack of trying."

"Why wouldn't he come?"

"He thinks I'm a moral coward. That the only reason to bring him would be so I wouldn't have to tell Agnes about her son."

"Agnes doesn't know?"

He shot her a look. "It's not the only thing Agnes doesn't know." He laughed wryly. "It's funny. You're the second person I've told tonight. The other was a stranger. Why can't I tell Agnes?"

"Yeah, but — " She grunted. "My uncle told me there'd be surprises here tonight, but I never thought anything like this...."

"Did you know I'd be here?"

"No. Did you know I would?"

He shook his head. A movement behind her distracted him and he stared up at the high ceiling. The illusion was strong, he could still see the columns, the expanse, feel the cool breeze. Then Sophi stood and walked away —

Glen snapped to his feet.

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He lunged for the narrow exit, heard Sophi call after him, and fell between the stacks. His face scraped against the old threadbare carpet. He pulled himself out, crawled blindly down the aisle, then managed to get to his feet.

Glen stood as still as he could, wrestling to control his breathing, slow his pulse. His vision strobed at the edges and he heard a wet roar in his ears that surged with his racing heart.

"Glen! You have to come back in here! We have to go out the way we came in!"

He whirled. Sophi leaned out into the aisle from the enclosure. She looked frightened in the stark light. Everything seemed reversed, the attic a mirror of what it should be.

A sensation like a tongue coiled through his right ear. He flinched away from it and turned. His stomach writhed.

At the end of the aisle he saw a dim shape like the mouth of a brick tunnel. As he drew nearer it resolved into a sooty arched wall with a heavy metal door set in the center. The black soot neatly sketched the masonry in precise lines, showing expert workmanship. He leaned close to the door. A small stamping identified it as manufactured by C.H. Kori, G.M.B.H., Berlin.

Glen stepped back quickly. The small of his back banged against a table, jostling its contents. He stared down at an assortment of objects that made no sense. The largest was an enormous set of calipers with a span of nearly fifteen inches, the scale etched deeply, notated by florid script. He looked from one item to another — a branding iron for a *fleur de lis*, a tall glass beaker filled with buckshot, a heavy leatherbound book labeled *Malleus Maleficarum*, a thin sheaf of papers entitled "Stanford-Binet Standard Test For Intelligence," a copy of a book called *Criminal Man* by Cesare Lombroso, a set of manacles, a band of steel with a key for expanding or shrinking its diameter, several sets of surgical instruments...

"Glen! Please! You have to come back! You're on the wrong side!"

Sophi still leaned out into the aisle. Glen swallowed dryly, looked to either side. Deeper shadows, more shapes he knew he did not wish to see closely. Another aisle extended away, impossibly long, flanked by dim shapes stacked against walls.

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"Glen!"

He ran. He felt her grab at his ankle, but he bolted past her, pushed the stair down, and nearly fell to the bottom. Sophi screamed for him to come back, but he raised the stair and left the closet.

He reached the last flight and forced himself to slow down. His breathing was harsh and he waited, hand on the railing. He heard no voices from below.

A phone. He needed a cab.

Glen walked down the corridor to the nearest room and opened the door. He groped for a lightswitch. A phone waited on a stand alongside a bed. Glen carefully closed the door and crossed the room.

There was no dialtone. Uselessly, he tapped the cradle.

"Damn."

A cold coil wrapped his torso. Glen grabbed the front of his shirt, gasped, and felt himself shoved back against the headboard.

It squatted on his lap, naked, skin like candlewax dripped over leather, and a wide face that grinned toothlessly. The large eyes, reddish-black, liquid, regarded him unblinking. It poked at his chest with a stubby finger.

Glen's entire body shook. He wanted to scream, but his voice seized in nightmare frustration. He did not want to touch it, but with violent urgency he swept it off of him with both arms and rolled away. He fell to the floor and scrambled to his knees.

It stared back at him from the other side of the bed. It opened its mouth and Glen felt warm air against his face.

Where are you going, Glen?

The voice sounded inside his head, clear and distinct, a lilting alto completely at odds with the misshapen thing across from him. He looked at the door.

In an instant it was across the bed, scrambling over his shoulders, onto his back. Glen pushed away from the bed, rolled on the floor, slapping at it. It grabbed his ears and clambered around his neck to the front of him. Glen managed to get to his feet and grab its arms. He tried to throw it off him and break for the door, but it clung to him, then swung around his head, overbalancing him. He fell heavily on his side, the air shoved out of his lungs, and it rolled him onto his back, jumped onto his chest, and slobbered on him.

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"What are you?"

Your tick.

The door opened. The thing looked up, glowered darkly, and disappeared.

Glen scrambled backward, pumping his arms and legs, toward the door, and came up against the wall.

"Oh, dear."

Glen could not stop the shaking in his arms and legs. He wiped at his face and looked up. James Travis stood just inside the door, gazing down at him with a look at once sympathetic and disappointed.

Slowly, Glen got to his feet. The front of his shirt was damp. He flinched at Travis's hand on his shoulder, but the older man did not let go. Glen felt himself firmly guided out of the bedroom.

Agnes stood at the top of the stairs, frowning. Glen opened his mouth, but he had nothing to say. On the edge of his vision he saw Travis shake his head, whereupon Agnes closed her eyes, sighed, and descended the stairs.

"Come along, Glen," Travis said. "We need to have a talk."

Travis, hand on his neck, guided him up to the third floor. Glen felt his legs tremble, his tread grow heavy, but he went, and it did not surprise him when Travis took him to the attic stair and back up to the cluttered aisle.

The lightbulbs still burned, but their light failed to illuminate the things stacked on either side of the red carpet. Glen peered into the shadows, but the shapes made no sense.

"Children do this so automatically they can't tell the difference," Travis said suddenly. "Sometimes they need a little help to cross over, a key, a rhyme, but really all that's required is will. The inner world and the external are seamless for them, until some order is imposed. They're correct to resent adults for intruding. It's painful to separate the two spaces, but they do it because they can't stand alone against it. Still, there are always some who never quite manage to maintain the distinction. A few of us learn to live in both. Very few. It's not something that can be encouraged in too many people, though. Too erratic."

They reached the end of the aisle and stopped before the oven.

"It's a problem, though. Just because you can't cross over anymore

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doesn't mean that this space goes away. Instead, it often becomes the place dreams come when we no longer need them." He gestured back the way they had come. "Some dreams are...unpleasant. The one side needs the other, but they can't be confused. The only way to keep things running right is to shut the one away, but that's never been simple. Sometimes it comes out and looks like something wonderful, something positive. Very difficult to convince people to turn their back on what's beautiful and desirable."

Glen shook his head. "Why would you want to?" He kept his eyes locked on the oven door.

"We don't always. But you never know when something beautiful might just be a break in the dam, a failure of the floodgate."

Glen licked his lips. His tongue felt dry, rough.

"To be honest," Travis continued, releasing his hold on Glen's neck, "we make mistakes. But there's no fault in that, we're learning. The only blame would be in a failure to learn. There've been times when that was the case and the results...well, you can see some of the results here. Attempts at putting the genie back in the bottle, as it were." He reached out and patted the arch of bricks above the oven door. "For some reason burning always seems popular."

Glen stepped back, his eyes shifting from the oven to Travis and back, unable to look at one or the other for very long. "What's happening? What — what was that — who *are* you?"

Travis smiled. "Just a politician."

"Bull*shit!*"

"It doesn't matter who I am, Glen. It's the Party that matters."

"The...Party...?"

"People like you undervalue consensus, Glen. You don't understand its nature. You don't understand its necessity. You want to go off and do what you want regardless of what the consensus wants. You don't understand what we do here — "

"Like hell. I know exactly what people like you do. You decide who fits and who doesn't. You make labels and tell us which is good and which is bad. Anything that's different, you try to get rid of." Glen waved at the oven. "You try but it never quite works. You never get us all. When are you going to learn that you can't judge people that way? We have a right to be who we are."

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Travis shook his head. "The Party doesn't give a damn who you are. That doesn't interest us in the least."

"Then — "

Travis gave the bricks a last pat. "This is what happens when we fail. When we can't reconcile the inner with the external. When consensual reality doesn't cover everything. And that only happens when too much of what's inside leaks out, uncontrolled." He stepped closer to Glen. "We don't care what you are on the inside. All we care about is how you act."

"You live a little too much inside your own head, don't you think?"

Travis raised an eyebrow. "You don't?"

Glen shook his head. He had spent his words already and did not seem to have anymore.

"You sound very much like your father did."

"My father...?"

"He hated us, too. Fought us."

"What did you do to him?"

"Nothing. He became his own victim. Like you. There wasn't enough of him to work with in the end, when he came here. But in your case, we can intervene before it's too late."

Travis waved Glen down the other aisle. Perversely, Glen's legs lurched him forward.

"It's gotten easier in the last couple of centuries," Travis said. "We found that distraction works quite well, but until Gutenberg there was really very little we could do for the greater mass of people. We had to rely on the daily misery of existence. Now, though, we have so much. People channel what would otherwise be an unmanageable breach into so much distraction that our work has become possible."

"Your work?"

Travis stopped. "Yes. We're politicians, Glen. We build consensus."

Travis reached out and pushed him, gently, but he stumbled backward. He saw the frame of a door, pale gray walls, James Travis framed, standing in the aisle.

"We all lie, Glen, when it suits us. In time, the lies become just as much who we are as who we think we are. The one will work just as well as the other." He smiled sadly. "It would have been pleasanter had you just

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gone along, Glen, but this works almost as well. I'll look forward to our next talk."

The door closed and the seams vanished. Glen lunged forward and frantically ran his fingers down the wall. Nothing.

"I was so worried, Glen."

He turned. The opposite wall was a panoramic window. Beyond, Sophi's face filled the view. Her eyes were red. Glen watched her hand come up, up, closer, then go past the edge of the window. Suddenly, she smiled.

"Dinner would be nice," she said, nodding. "Are you sure you're all right now?"

She laughed. Glen fell back against the wall and slid to the floor.

"I thought you had to go back to Albuquerque," Sophi said. "Well, sure, I'd love you to stay — "

Glen watched, frozen by the images. Dinner, conversation. Later, at the hotel, waiting up, Ray came in. Glen watched Ray grow angrier. Glen could not hear what "he" said, but judging from Ray's reactions, they were breaking up. Ray did not understand. Glen pounded on the window, but he soon gave up. Ray could not hear him trying to get out. All Ray heard, apparently, were words that clearly stunned him, then tore at him. Ray stood in the center of the hotel room, hands on hips, trying not to let it show. He rubbed his face a lot.

"What did she do, threaten to disown you? Who do you think I mean? Your goddamn mother! Excuse me? Don't *talk* about her that way? Shit, you've been telling me since we've known each other what a manipulative — what? *What*? Oh, this is righteous! You and Agnes, reconciled! I'll believe that the day you take a wife!"

Glen shook his head. He felt tears, but he did not wipe them away.

"I'm on the wrong side," he said aloud.

"Maybe I *should* have gone to the party," Ray said.

"Maybe you should have," Glen murmured. "Maybe I shouldn't."

Blackness. Sleep. But his thoughts were vivid, lucid. He was stuck inside the pretense, the face he had always shown...his mother....

In the morning he took a cab to the manse. Agnes met him at the door herself.

"Glen, I didn't expect to see you this early. Come in, dear."

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Glen?

"I hope you had a good time last night. I know it was unfair not to warn you that it was a Party affair, but then Sophi was here and — what? Of course, dear, you can talk to me. What's wrong?"

They were out on the patio now, sitting at the glass-topped breakfast table. Agnes gazed at him, listening attentively. She frowned occasionally and once she reached across the table to grasp his hand.

"It's all right. We can handle this. That's what families are for, Glen. It's all right. I'm...well, I'm glad you told me. Thank you for trusting me. I'll do what I can, of course."

She looked around suddenly and stood.

"Oh, James, I'm glad you're here. I need another favor. Glen, dear, you remember Sophi's uncle, James Travis?"

Glen turned his face away from the window, pressed his eyes into the crook of his arm. The words came through. He wished desperately for a way to switch off the sound, but the words came through.

When he looked around again he saw Sophi. She was smiling down at a small ring case.

Glen crawled to the window. He touched its smooth, cool surface. Seamless, perfect, an ideal barrier.

He pressed a thumbnail against it and pulled down. It bled.

Glen breathed deeply. It might take a long time. He traced the line again. Again. Deeper. Again.

"However long it takes," he said, and in time it was all he said.

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Ray Vukcevich published his first novel, The Man of Maybe Half-a-Dozen Faces, *earlier this year, and he's currently at work on a sequel. He took time out from writing his novel to leave this little present on our doorstep; with its somber and serious title, this story seemed just right for an issue with a lot of tales bearing one-word titles.*

Poop

By Ray Vukcevich

SOMETIMES THEY FELT LIKE kids again, his arm around her shoulders, her arm around his waist, standing over the sleeping baby, this late-in-life lazy sperm, test tube wonder they'd named Lewis, because Lewis was a popular name these days (and you can call him Lewie), and just because Lewie's parents were in their forties didn't mean he had to walk around with an out-of-fashion name. Hey, years ago, they might have named him after one of Marilyn's favorite causes. So, what's your name little boy? And he'd look down at his shoes and mutter, Save-The-Whales, sir.

You couldn't expect the sailing to always be smooth. "It's not like getting another cat," he said or she said and they agreed that no, it was not like getting another cat. Even the cats they already had knew it was not like getting another cat. Not so much the smell of talcum and sour diapers nor the fact that the guest room now had a permanent resident. It was more a wound tight constant watchfulness. Karl and Marilyn knew babies weren't made out of glass, but knowing that didn't mean they weren't on constant alert for danger. The cats all had the same new name, and that new name was "get away from there!"

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One evening when Karl went into his Honey-I'm-home routine, she rushed out of the shadows sobbing with a bundle and pushed it into his arms and ran out of the room.

Well, it was his turn. He put little Lewis down on the couch and pulled at the Velcro tabs and peeled back the diaper and took a look at the load Lewis had left. It seemed to consist entirely of perfectly formed discrete bits, brown and soft looking, and shaped like an assortment of threaded nuts and bolts. Aside from the usual bad smells Karl had come to expect, there was also a hint of machine oil. Jeeze, what had the kid been eating?

"Hey, Marilyn!" he said. "Come on back out here. You gotta see this."

"No," she called. "That's just the point. When it's your turn, I definitely don't have to see it."

He grabbed Lewie's feet, pulled the dirty diaper away and made a neat package of it. He hoisted the baby up higher and washed his bottom.

From somewhere far away, Karl could hear music, like the local philharmonic had decided to take a few turns around the block. He looked back over his shoulder at the window. The sound didn't seem to be coming from the street. In fact, it seemed to be coming from Lewis. Feed your baby little radios and he will forever have a song in his heart? Karl moved to put his ear down on the baby's stomach, but first strategically positioned his hand, having already been hosed in the traditional first defiant act of the son lashing out at the father, and listened. Yes, there it was — tummy music.

"Hey, Marilyn, the kid's playing Bach!" Karl called.

"Concerto? Or Symphony?" she asked.

"You could come listen for yourself."

"Not a chance," she said.

The music stopped suddenly. Maybe it had been coming from the apartment below. Karl fixed Lewis up with a fresh diaper.

Lewis got a look on his face like he'd eaten a bowling ball and maybe now was the time to throw a strike.

"Oh no," Karl said. "Not again. Not so soon."

The diaper bulged around the baby's thighs. It pulsed like the heart of a jogger. It bunched and unbunched like a fist in a glove.

When all movement finally stopped, Karl peeled the diaper down.

Small brown birds burst into the air and flew away in all directions.

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Karl jerked away with a startled cry.

"You can knock off the sound effects," Marilyn called. "I'm not going to look."

The birds settled on the curtain rod above the big picture window. They spent a few moments squabbling and preening and elbowing for position before settling in to stony silence and sidelong glances.

"This is serious, Marilyn," he said, and she must have heard something serious in his voice because a moment later she appeared at the kitchen door.

"What in the world?" she said when she spotted the birds.

"Lewis," Karl said.

He looked back down at Lewis, and Lewis pumped his legs and waved his arms. His diaper was not too messy. In fact, Karl couldn't tell if what was there had been left by Lewis or by the birds. Marilyn sat down on the couch and Lewis stretched his arms back over his head and rolled up his eyes to look at her. She absently tickled his nose and he giggled and snatched at her hand. Running mostly on automatic now, Karl washed the baby again and changed his diaper.

He looked at Marilyn over the baby and she looked at him.

"Where did the birds come from, Karl?" she asked.

"From Lewis," he said. "They were in his diaper."

"Don't be silly," she said. "Really. There must be a window open somewhere."

"Sure," he said, "that must be it."

But he didn't believe it, and she could see he didn't believe it, and he could see that she didn't believe it either. Lewis gurgled and giggled and his parents, long practiced in marital telepathy, zapped thoughts back and forth above his head. We can handle this. We're adults. We can do it. No we can't. We're children ourselves. What do we know about babies. No one told us anything about this. What are we going to do? I wish my mother was here. I wish your mother was here, too, or my mother. Your mother wouldn't know what to do. What's wrong with my mother? Would you shut up about your mother?

Lewis rumbled and filled his pants again.

"I'm afraid to look," Karl said.

Marilyn reached over the baby and pulled the Velcro tabs.

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A multitude of mice exploded from Lewie's diaper. Karl and Marilyn leaped up off the couch yelling. The mice scrambled over the baby's stomach and legs and across the couch and off onto the floor, definitely hitting the ground running, and the birds screamed and leaped into flight crossing and recrossing in the air, never quite colliding, swooping down on the fleeing mice, not catching any as the mice hot-footed it under the furniture. The cats, no longer cowering, dashed around after the mice and jumped and swatted at the birds.

Marilyn covered the baby with her body. Karl stood over them both waving away the birds and kicking at the mice the cats had flushed from under the furniture.

"We might as well be on the moon," Karl said. There was absolutely no one to ask. So many friends, but none of their friends would have a clue about this.

"What?"

Check the baby books. They had an entire shelf of baby books. They had had lots of time for research. They hadn't gone into this with their eyes closed. Or maybe call the pediatrician. Doctor, is it normal for my baby to be pooping birds and mice?

"We need someone to tell us what to do," Karl said.

"Shouldn't we know what to do?" Marilyn asked.

"Yes," Karl said. "We should know what to do." But even as he said it he could see that they both realized they would never know what to do. There would never be a single time they would be able to say for sure, yes, this is the right thing to do — this definitely is right for you, Lewis. This is what should happen or this is how it should be. We're absolutely right to say you can't go there. We know what we're talking about when we say you should do this instead of that. Father knows best. Listen to your mother.

There came wet sputtering flatulence from Lewis, gastrointestinal distress, but also words, surely words, muttering, whispering, a gravelly voice from a place no words had ever come before. It was as if the speaker were trying all of the languages on Earth looking for the one that would work in this situation. Then there was a tremendous clearing of the throat, so to speak.

The birds retreated to the curtain rod again and took their seats like

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theater patrons after an intermission. Karl and Marilyn sat down again on either side of Lewis and waited to see what he would produce next.

What Lewis produced next was unearthly and smelly, obviously from elsewhere, and it seemed to surprise the baby as much as his parents. Someone said, "Hello, Father. Hello, Mother."

Karl looked at Marilyn. "Er... hello," he said.

"But who is speaking?" she whispered.

Karl didn't know. He shook his head. "Maybe a ghost?"

"You're suggesting my baby's butt is haunted?"

"Do you suppose we could think of these as his first words?" Karl asked.

"Will you two shut up and listen for a moment?"

"You shouldn't tell your elders to shut up," Karl said.

"I have come back to speak of a time some fifteen years in the future when you will be faced with what might seem like a trivial decision to you."

Karl reached over the baby and put his hands on Marilyn's shoulders. They leaned together head to head looking down at Lewis.

After a silence in which Karl suddenly worried that maybe they'd simply gone crazy and didn't know whether that was a comfort or not, the voice spoke again. "There will come the time when Lewis wants to attend a camp out in the desert in which the other guests will be both girls and boys."

"Yes?" Marilyn said.

"You'll worry about beer and drugs that haven't even been invented yet."

"Oh, no," Marilyn said.

"You'll worry about sex and diseases that haven't even been invented yet."

"And?" Karl asked. He suddenly knew that he should pay particular attention to that look on Lewie's face. It would be a look he would need to watch out for in the future.

"You must let him go," the voice said.

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FILMS

KATHI MAIO

THE QUANTUM PHYSICS OF LOST CHANCES

THE POSTER for the film *Frequency* cries out "What if...?" in gigantic type. Not exactly an original tag line, to be sure. After all, "what if..." could be the motto of every fictional work ever written or filmed. But this phrase does hold even more significance within the realm of science fiction and fantasy.

In the case of the *Frequency* poster, the giant open-ended question is followed by three variants of a more precise nature: "What if you could reach back in time?" Then, "What if you could change the past?" And, finally, "What if it changed everything?"

Heavy-duty queries. And ones not at all uncommon in fantasy film. Time travel movies have always posed such questions, usually within a context of larger-than-life tales of messianic destiny and dire threats of humanity's annihilation. (You've got to have *some* excuse for lots of spectacular combat!) Think *Terminator*, here.

Recently, however, I've perceived a slight shift away from the action-oriented blockbuster of time travel and parallel universes, toward something a bit more philosophical and personal. Films where the explosive epic sweep downsizes dramatically, from the galactic to the domestic. Obviously, even this isn't a new concept in filmmaking. (That perennial favorite, *It's a Wonderful Life*, was released more than fifty years ago.) But it might, still, constitute a trend.

If you haven't noticed this pattern, well, it could just be wishful thinking on my part. But it could also be that the movies I have in mind are small-scale flights of magic realism that get little publicity,

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especially in the sf field. Few of these intimate, interpersonal altered-time speculations ever hit it big. But if they don't come close to making the money of a mega-hit like *T2* or *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me*, neither do they cost as much to make. Lower costs are one reason, no doubt, that they're being produced. But I'd like to think that money isn't the most important reason.

There is a longing in our hearts. And that longing is all tied up with the expanding possibilities and increasingly complex choices of modern life. We all wish that life were simpler, more stable, and filled with the kind of shining promise we associate with the period right after World War II. (That's one reason many time-travel fantasies, like 1998's *Pleasantville*, plunk modern characters back into an idealized version of the 1950s.)

The fact is, although they tell us that we are living in prosperous times, few of us *feel* that optimistic. We are filled, instead, with a vague sense of dread involving latter-day bogeys like terrorist threats, plunging tech stock prices, global warming, and Frankenstein foods. Moreover, on a personal level, we have this sneaking suspicion that we took a few crucial wrong turns on the fast-paced superhighway of our lives.

Who said "what ifs" have to involve alien races slaughtering and enslaving humanity? More powerful are our private sorrows, and their accompanying speculations about the might-have-beens of family and romance. These are regrets that we have never felt more keenly. And that is why they are making their way into movies.

1998's *Sliding Doors* is one such movie you might have seen. In it, Gwyneth Paltrow plays two divergent versions of a woman named Helen. In one life, Helen takes a subway home after being fired, and finds her lazy, cheating lover (John Lynch) in bed with another woman. In her alternate life, she misses the train, and therefore doesn't immediately learn that her beloved is a faithless bastard. As the two parallel lives play out over the course of a few months, the latter Helen leads a life of waitress drudgery, hoodwinked by her two-timing beau. Meanwhile, Helen number one cuts her hair, goes blonder (a sure sign of success!), starts a fabulous new entrepreneurial career, and finds a sweet, dishy new boyfriend (John Hannah). It seems obvious which is the preferable life. Until the film delivers a final twist or two.

Sliding Doors is a slight film, but not without its charms. And

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the same could be said for another example from last year, *Twice Upon a Yesterday*, an Anglo-Spanish production in which the faithless boyfriend is actually the protagonist. Victor (Douglas Henshall) confesses his infidelity to his long-time girlfriend (Lena Headey), only to realize, after she leaves him, that she was his one true love. Two enchanted garbage men give him a chance to turn back the clock to before his confessional blunder, but that doesn't mean that the course of true love will necessarily run smooth.

Quiet humor, uncluttered narrative, romantic sophistication, quirky fatalism — there are many attributes of the two above-mentioned films that tell you, instantly, that they were not made in Hollywood by a major studio. In Hollywood, even the most homey fantasy is generally beefed up with splashy FX, a bigger story, and a more contrived (and relentlessly "happy") ending. Occasionally, as with the original *Back to the Future* film, the all-out Hollywood treatment actually turns out an excellent film.

In the majority of cases, though, the Big Studio approach is overly ambitious, or, worse, a calculated attempt to throw into a single movie a little something for every demographic group. As the film formulas and story elements pile up, one by one, a film can collapse under its own weight. And audience disbelief, once suspended, can thud to the ground.

Sadly, such is the case with *Frequency*, written by Toby Emmerich, and directed by Gregory Hoblit. It has all the elements of a good movie, with a few more thrown in for bad measure...just enough to leave us scoffing at a movie that, for the first hour or so, involves its audience completely.

The film's basic concept is an intriguing one. Lost Modern Man, thoroughly dysfunctional mama's boy, and New York City Police Detective John Sullivan (Jim Caviezel) is falling apart. His girlfriend has left him. He's drinking too much. And as the anniversary of his father's death approaches, he is increasingly morose. During the spooky light dance of a very active Aurora Borealis, he gets out an old ham radio belonging to his late dad, and he responds to a voice coming through the speaker. It is his long-lost father, thirty years earlier, transmitting under a similar Northern Lights display.

As time travel movies go, *Frequency* is almost plausible, since

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the two male leads never physically go backward and forward in time—only their transmitted voices take the trip. Not that practical science matters much. For this movie isn't really about wormholes, string theory, or any other concept of quantum physics. It is actually about severed family connections being healed. It is also the quest of a post-feminist man trying to rediscover the manly-man heroism of a bygone (yet tantalizingly recent) age.

The comfortably masculine heroism of the sixties is embodied by John's dad, Frank Sullivan (played, very well I might add, by the underrated Dennis Quaid). A brash firefighter as well as a tender family man, Frank Sullivan seems like a man well-equipped to negotiate the challenges of latter-day masculinity and teach his son how to do the same. But, alas, he is killed in the line of duty in a warehouse fire when his little "chief" is only six. Or is he?

Grown John gives his Dad a crucial warning from the future, and ends up changing the course of (his very personal) history. *Frequency* is the flipside of that classic philosophy of physics conundrum, "the grandfather paradox." Instead of speculating what it would mean to go back in time and kill your own grandfather, the film posits what it would mean to go back and save your own father from certain death.

And if that's all it did, it would probably be a better movie. Then, it could have actually explored, a bit, the issues the film introduces relating to the impact of an absent father on the development of a boy. But, this being a major studio film, it has to go for more chills and spills (of blood, that is). Therefore, the filmmakers feel compelled to throw a serial killer murder mystery into the fantasy mix.

Somehow, by saving his father, John unleashes the "Nightingale Killer" on his nurse mother (Elizabeth Mitchell). Dad safe! Mom slaughtered! Oh, no! So, father and son feverishly work both sides of a thirty-year-old case, trying to foil the murderer before he can dispatch their favorite gal.

You know, I thought the Jack the Ripper sub-plot of *Time After Time* (1979) worked well within the context of Meyer's seventies social satire and Wellsian homage. But that film was a lightweight entertainment, well-suited to a few potboiler touches. Not so, *Frequency*, which comports itself like a sentimental family drama before it abruptly shifts gears.

The absurdities of Mr. Emmer-

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ich's unwieldy plot compound themselves at an exponential rate from this point right up to the hokey, sentimental, All-American end of the movie. Every known cliché—including the slasher trick of "the monster that will not die"—will be used before the credits roll. And a wonderful little movie will have squandered almost all of the faith you've placed in it.

I could enumerate a long list of things that make no bloody sense about this movie. But to do that I would have to expose more of the suspense plot than I really should if you are going to see the film. And, despite how badly it falls apart at the end, I can't say that I would discourage you from seeing *Frequency*.

Had the filmmakers kept their story simple and true to the heart, they could have made a wonderful movie. As it is, the first forty-five minutes of *Frequency* are well worth watching, even though they are a frustrating reminder of what might have been.

Much more satisfying is another film, released at the same time as *Frequency*, called *Me Myself I*. Never heard of it? Don't feel bad. It received only limited art house release. Still, this unabashedly small film — about a single woman's parallel life as a hausfrau — succeeds precisely because it never loses track of the intimate story it sets out to tell.

Of course it doesn't hurt that it stars a phenomenal actor, Rachel Griffiths *(Hilary and Jackie, My Son the Fanatic)* in the dual role of Pamela Drury. Pamela #1 is a single journalist, still living out of boxes in her apartment, looking for love in the personal ads. In the middle of a particularly bad day, she is struck by a car, driven by...herself.

Only, Pamela #2 married her long-ago sweetheart and now lives in suburbia with her husband and three kids. Domestic Pamela takes Careerist Pamela back home, and then abandons her, so that Pam #1 has to play catch-up in the life she thought she always wanted. Married to the one who got away? What bliss! Or, maybe not.

Written and directed by former film editor (of movies like *Shine)* Pip Karmel, this French-Australian production is a delight: an exploration of lost chances and parallel lives that somehow comes to the optimistic conclusion that whatever one's personal "road not taken," it is never worth sighing over too bitterly. Better to stride onward, bringing a little self-acceptance and enthusiasm to the life you're living.

"What ifs" be damned.

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A physician by training and practice, Michael Blumlein writes stories as though they were scalpels and forceps that allow him to explore regions of the human soul most people are afraid to see. This sharp-edged new one from the borderlands of the fantastic is unflinching, unnerving, and utterly compelling.

Fidelity: A Primer

By Michael Blumlein

I. Born Torn

LYDELL CALLED ME WITH the news that he was torn. This, of course, was no news at all. Lydell has been torn since birth. This time it had to do with his sons, Max and Ernest. The boys were twins, and still in utero. Lydell couldn't decide whether to have them circumcised or not.

He'd done the leg-work. When it came to so deeply personal a matter, he was nothing if not thorough. Uncircumcised men, he had found, did have a slightly higher incidence of infection, but the infections were usually trivial and easily treated. Balanitis, where the foreskin became red and inflamed, was uncommon. Phimosis, where the inflammation led to scarring, trapping the penis in its hood and making erections and intercourse painful (if not impossible), was likewise rare.

Circumcision, by contrast, was a uniformly traumatic event. What effect this trauma had was debatable, although the preponderance of evidence suggested long-lasting and not entirely beneficial sequelae. Such

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a grisly and disfiguring procedure at so young and tender an age. At any age. Was this absolutely necessary for a man to be a man? Some thought not.

As to the issue of pleasure, there seemed little question. The greater the amount of intact skin, the greater the concentration of nerves. The greater the concentration of nerves, the better the sensation. And while sensation itself did not guarantee pleasure, there was certainly the chance that it might.

On the other hand was tradition. Lydell was a Jew. Jews were circumcised. Judith, his wife, thought the boys might think it slightly odd if they were not. But she could see the advantage in not doing it, most notably the avoidance of unnecessary pain and trauma. If pressed, she would probably have cast her vote with letting the poor things' tiny penises be, but in the end, she deferred to her husband, who not only had a penis but strong views as to its proper handling and use.

Lydell consulted a rabbi, who advised him to search his soul. He suggested he remember his parentage and lineage, and if he still had doubts after that, to take a good hard look in the mirror. In addition, he referred him to the Old Testament, First Kings, Chapter 3, which spoke of King Solomon, the great and illustrious Jewish leader, who, when faced with two women, each claiming to be the mother of the same infant, advised them to share the baby by cutting it in two. The false mother agreed, the true one did not, and thus was the question of motherhood decided.

Lydell pondered the well-known tale. On the face of it, the message seemed clear enough: be clever, be insightful, value life (and love) above possessions. But the lesson seemed difficult to generalize, and Lydell sensed a deeper meaning that was far from transparent. He puzzled it day and night, up until the very hour of the boys' birth.

They came out strapping and healthy, with dark, curly hair, brown eyes, and flattened little baby faces. Identical faces. Identical bodies, too. They were, in fact, identical twins.

It was a transformative event for Lydell. Both the birth and the fact that they were identical. A light seemed to shine from above (it was a sunny day). Suddenly, the path was clear. Ernest and Max, Max and Ernest: the very sameness of the children held the key to the solution. An

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individual was a precious thing — perhaps the most precious thing in the world. Just as the true mother would not permit her only child to be split asunder, so Lydell would not allow his two sons to grow up indistinguishable from one another. They were unique, and thus would be uniquely set apart.

One would be circumcised (this fell to Max). The other (Ernest) would not.

Judith took issue with this, strong issue, but Lydell would not be deterred. He was resolute, and she had little choice but to go along. She soothed herself (or tried) with the belief that somehow, somewhere, he knew best. The penis was his territory: she kept telling herself this. It was her mantra during this difficult and trying time. The penis was his.

II. Poolside, Where a Stone Tossed Years Before Creates a Ripple

He had a lingering medical problem. She had a difficult marriage. They met at the pool where their children were taking swimming lessons.

Her eyes were large and compassionate.

His hair was to his shoulders.

He wore a silver bracelet and held his wrist coquettishly.

She favored skirts that brushed the floor.

They sat on a wooden bench with their backs to the wall, watching the children swim. They spoke without turning, like spies. Pointed observations delivered in a glancing, off-handed way.

She was a devoted mother.

He was a solicitous father.

He had a daughter. She, two sons.

The swimming lessons lasted thirty minutes. To him this was never quite enough. He worked alone and felt the need for contact. He wanted more.

She was often distracted by her sons, delighted by their antics and their progress. She would clap for them and call out her encouragement.

He sensed in some small way that she was using them as a buffer, or a baffle, to deflect his interest in her and hers in him, to disrupt their fledgling chemistry.

They spoke about their jobs. About their children's schools. About religion. She was Jewish. They spoke about the Holocaust. She decried the

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lingering hatred. Decried and understood it. She was interested, in theory, in forgiveness.

He listened to her closely and attentively, often nodding his agreement. He showed his sympathy and understanding, smelled her hormones, won her trust.

At the end of the lessons they parted without ceremony, sometimes without so much as a word. She wrapped her sons in towels and escorted them to the dressing room, waiting outside the door until they were done. He did the same for his daughter. Afterward, there was candy and then the walk to the car. Often the five of them walked together, though they rarely spoke. The kids weren't interested, and the grown-ups had had their time together. Half an hour, session done.

III. Brain Work

His name was Wade: He'd been married twenty years. There was a family history of mental illness, notably depression (a grandmother) and manic-depression (a great-aunt). Another grandmother suffered from feelings of inferiority. Wade's father had a number of compulsions, none incapacitating, while his mother, heroic in so many ways, lived with the anxieties and minor hysterias typical of a woman of thwarted ambition with too much time on her hands.

Wade himself, like his great-aunt, was a victim of mood swings. A year previously, after a brief bout of mania followed by a much longer one of depression, he started taking medication.

It was a good year for medication. Sales were booming, and three of the top ten drugs on the market were specifically designed to treat disturbances of mood. This represented an enormous advance from the days of his great aunt, who had to make do with electric shock (it served her well), insulin shock (not so well), and prolonged hospitalizations.

Wade tried Prozac, but it left him feeling muzzy-headed, about as animated as a stone. He tried Zoloft, with the same effect. Paxil likewise left him feeling like a zombie, and in addition, it robbed him of his sex drive.

He was too young to go without sex. At forty-six, he felt he was still too young to be a zombie. So he stopped the medication.

Eli Lilly called him. Pfizer called him. SmithKline Beecham called

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him, too. They sympathized with his problem. Sacrifice was difficult. No man should have to give up his manhood. But likewise, no man, particularly no American man, should have to be depressed.

Ironically, after stopping the pills, he got better. He was no longer victimized by sudden bouts of mania, nor was he paralyzed by depression. He was able to work, to care for his daughter and be a decent husband to his wife. He was sane again, and functional, in all ways except one. He remained impotent.

This happens, said his doctor. Give it time. This happens, said Lilly, Pfizer, and Beecham. Read the small print. We regret the inconvenience. We're working on a cure.

Months went by, and he didn't recover. His penis didn't get hard, not even in the morning when his bladder was full. His penis, poor thing, rarely stirred.

IV. Virtue and Necessity

Judith had no intention of having an affair. She believed in the sanctity of marriage, most especially her own. That said, her husband had of late been going through one of those times of his. One of those intense and trying times of self-intoxication, when he couldn't see beyond himself, couldn't think or talk about anything but him.

Judith did her best to show compassion, but in truth, she was tired of his histrionics. Ten years of marriage, eight since the boys were born, had taken their toll. She wanted a man, not another child to care for.

Men were useful, or they could be — vaguely, she remembered this. They had that male way about them, that male sense of entitlement and self, that male look and feel. In theory, there was much to recommend a man.

She wanted one.

V. In Heat

The pool was by the ocean. Cypress trees and sand dunes ringed the parking lot. Across the street in one direction was a golf course. In another was the city zoo.

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Often, when walking to their cars, they'd hear a high-pitched keening sound. A peacock's cry, perhaps an animal in heat. Or a golfer in extremis.

She was a businesswoman. She organized trade conventions.

He was a cartoonist. He made his living with ink and pen.

He had a fey and predatory nature.

She had a sixth sense.

Their conversations were never casual.

She was in a book group, all women. Why all women? he asked, to get her talking about her womanhood. To be among women.

It's safer, she said. The whole sexual thing. And women have a way of talking. They have an understanding.

They see beneath the surface.

They share the same complaints.

What complaints, he asked.

She smiled. So many.

For three months they met. They never touched, not once. Sat an inch apart, backs to the wall, sweaty and sticky in the steamy equatorial heat of the pool. The children were their safety net. The children and their marriages, their loyalties, their loves, their pacts.

VI. Setting the Record Straight

I'd like to clear my chest. Bear with me on this. I've known several Judiths in my life. One was a belly dancer. Another was a lawyer. The one who stands out the most was a red-headed woman, big boned and brassy, out of Nebraska. Married a man name of Chan, Sam Chan, an acupuncturist. The two of them emigrated to Argentina, where they set up practice. As far as I know, none of these Judiths ever worked on conventions, or for that matter, had twins. But it's possible. I just can't say for sure.

As for Lydell, the only Lydell I remember with certainty was a football player, and I may be wrong about that. It might have been basketball, and come to think of it, the name was Lyell, not Lydell.

On the other hand, this guy Wade, this is a guy I know. And I have to say, my opinion of him is not high. I met him at the pool — Judith introduced us — and we ended up seeing each other a few times on the side. So what I know about him is firsthand information. It's gospel. Same

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goes for his wife, a helluva nice lady name of Flora, whom I also had the chance to meet. What she sees in a guy like this is beyond me. The man's a charmer, no question, especially with the ladies. But the fact is, he only delivers what he himself decides to. What and when. That's the type of guy he is.

His whole purpose in coming on to Judith was to save his marriage. That's how he justified it. It was the impotence thing — he just couldn't stand not being able to get a hard-on. It was a humiliation to him, he said. A humiliation and a disgrace.

He and Flora had tried everything. The pills, the pumps, the injections, the talk. He'd been to a prostitute. And hypnotism, he'd tried that. Now he was trying a married woman.

He didn't plan to take it all the way, even if she wanted to. He had his limits, or so he said. It was the idea of it, the titillation. The journey, not the destination. The hunt.

It was a noble purpose, I suppose. To save a marriage. (Although to hear Flora tell it, she was getting by all right. She was, by nature, independent, and had her work to occupy her. She also kept a plastic dildo in her bedside table to use in time of need.)

A noble purpose, but ignobly executed. The man was using Judith. That's what I can't stomach.

Then again, she was using him.

VII. A Somewhat Tortured Logic

The boys had a pet rat named Snowflake. She was a gentle, friendly rat, with a white coat and a long pink tail. At the age of a year Snowflake developed a tumor in her side. It was small at first, the size of a grape, but it grew rapidly. By six months it was the size and consistency of a ripe plum. They took her to a vet, who diagnosed a lipoma, in other words, a big ball of fat. This was good news in the sense that it wasn't cancer. Less good was the two-hundred-dollar fee to have it excised.

Lydell felt the surgery unwarranted. Snowflake was a rat, and rats could be had for pennies. Beyond the issue of cost was the deeper question of value, the life lesson about man and the natural world. In Lydell's view, intervention was far too often man's way with nature. And it didn't have

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to be. There was much to be said for watchfulness, for letting the world weave its intricate and beautiful web without disrupting its threads prematurely, if ever.

There was also the issue of anthropocentrism. Judging the rat unhappy in its current condition was so quintessentially human a gesture, so human an assumption, that it could easily be a mistake. Perhaps, the creature was content with its burden. Perhaps, it didn't care.

The question of consciousness came up: did the rat notice that it was different from other rats? Was it even aware of the mass?

After some discussion, it was agreed that the rat did, in fact, notice. There was really no ignoring a lump that size. But whether it cared, whether its level of consciousness included a sense of dissatisfaction with the ways things were and a desire to change them — this was uncertain. Snowflake had such a genial temperament to begin with. Even when the mass, after being dragged along the floor of the cage for months on end, became infected, her demeanor didn't noticeably change. Perhaps she slowed down a bit, but then she had never been a speedy rat in the first place. And being a rat of good breeding and character, qualities the boys learned about in detail, she wasn't the type to complain.

The tumor grew. At a subsequent visit the vet was frankly amazed. "This animal should have been dead months ago," he exclaimed, a comment notable, if not for its thoughtlessness, then certainly for its ambiguity. The boys were left to ponder just what exactly he meant.

Max, a child with a penchant for polemics, assumed he meant that without the operation Snowflake would be better off dead. He didn't want her to die, and he argued with his father to intervene. He invoked the rights of animals, the concept of tzedakah (charitable deeds, from a charitable heart), the universality of souls. A canny, verbally precocious boy, he presented his case eloquently (albeit unsuccessfully). In this he made his father proud.

Ernest was more deliberate, more reserved. He was cautious in expressing his opinions and shied from conflict. On the surface he accepted his father's dictum. The rat would live its life, then die. But underneath the surface he knew differently. Underneath, his mind was rife with visionary landscapes and dreams. If Snowflake should have been dead but wasn't, then clearly she had powers hitherto unimagined. He'd

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read about such beings — entities, they were called — in comic books; he'd seen them on TV. Alien entities. Invincible, ineffable, immortal ones.

Snowflake was, clearly, no ordinary rat. Each day she lived and beat the odds was proof of this. She was something different. Something special. Something more.

He therefore didn't worry what would happen. Snowflake would take care of that herself. Consequently, there was no reason to argue with his father about what to do. On the contrary, there was reason not to argue. Ernest agreed with his father. Leave the rat alone.

Judith, meanwhile, fumed.

She agreed that a rat was a rat, but this particular rat, their rat, was a pet. Pets were family, and family needed to be looked after. She thought what Lydell was doing, what he was teaching, was stingy, gratuitous, and cruel.

And insufferable. And sadistic. And Nazi-Darwinistic (she got to him with that). And, quite frankly, obscene.

He got her back one night. Got her bad. He was talking about the money they were saving by letting nature take its course. Then he dropped the bomb.

He wanted to use it to get Ernest circumcised.

Ernest at this point was eight.

Judith said, No way.

Lydell pleaded his point. He admitted to having made a mistake.

Live with it, she said.

He couldn't. — I look at him and think, how can this be a Jew?

— He's a Jew if he wants to be. If you let him.

— I'm ashamed of myself. I set him apart. I thought I knew best, but I didn't.

— You want to atone? Leave him alone. Practice what you preach.

— Let's ask him, said Lydell.

Her eyes flashed. — Don't you dare.

VIII. Idealism! Temptation! Restraint!

She had long fingers, hazelnut eyes, and a passion for people.

He had a soft mouth and a way with words.

She missed the freedom and excitement of her younger days.

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He dressed for the occasions. Wore his brightest colors. Worked for her attention.

She saw in him a respite. A way station on the arduous and lifelong path of marriage. She was going through a period of reflection, a taking account of her life. She was recalling what had been put aside, what dream of self, what vision. Retracing her past to its fork points: the choice to marry, to have a career, to be a mother. And prior to that, the choice to end the wildness and anarchy of a protracted adolescence, the choice to grow up and follow the rules. To be a solid citizen. To practice self-respect and love.

Which she intended to continue.

Being an honorable woman. With honorable desires.

She never littered. She never spat. She wouldn't cheat.

A woman of conviction, she had her limits, too.

He favored irregularly shaped panels as opposed to the traditional squares. He also liked to experiment with sequencing and placement. Linear cartooning was too constrained for his taste. Too contrived. If he was going to the trouble of drawing all those pictures, he wanted people to look at them, not skim past them as if they were the written word.

He had Ideas. He spoke of a modern aesthetic. Commitment to craft and to Art with a capital A. He was passionate, which tempered his pomposity.

She was drawn to him.

He thrilled at the game they were playing.

He also had qualms.

He meant no harm.

She was flattered by his attention. Interested in his ideas. At one time she herself had painted.

Aha, he chortled. A kindred spirit!

Hardly that, was her reply. A hobbyist, at best. But nothing at all since the boys were born. She missed the creativity of it, the tactile pleasure of brush in hand, the fun. Not that she couldn't live without. Obviously, she could. And furthermore, she didn't believe in regrets.

He agreed. Regrets were useless.

Yes, she said. Completely useless.

Utterly, he added with finality.

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At that they ceased to speak, meditating silently on the uselessness of regret.

They were so determined to be friends. It was their stated purpose. A male and female friendship. Their creed.

Mirabile dictu! Such lofty ideals! Such audacity. Intimacy without jeopardy. Freedom of expression. Pleasure without pain.

IX. Further Revelations

How do I know these things? Word gets around. These are my friends.

If you believe Wade, what he was doing was for a good cause. If you ask me, Flora let him get away with far too much. But she saw it differently. She, after all, had to live with his mood swings, and he'd been free of them for nearly a year. She wasn't about to upset that particular apple cart. Her philosophy was fairly straightforward: if a man wanted to hang himself, so be it. The tighter the leash, the greater the chance it would break.

Judith, quite simply, was filling a need. When you're with someone like Lydell for as long as she was, someone with his capacity for self-absorption, you can't help but have periods of longing. Periods when you feel yourself shriveling for lack of companionship. Periods of self-doubt when you wonder if anyone hears you or sees you at all.

Judith fought these feelings. She had work, which helped. She had her children. And now she had a new companion, someone who wanted her around, someone who looked at her and listened.

It was a flirtation of ideas, she told herself. A flirtation of interests. A flirtation of spirit and, therefore, of necessity.

Flirtation, she felt, did not preclude fidelity. On the contrary. Fidelity depended on respect, and it was self-respect that made her flirt. God, she knew, helped those who helped themselves. It was up to her to make her presence known.

X. The Scholar Finds a Way

Sabbath Day. Lydell wears a yarmulke pinned to his head and a many-fringed tallit around his hefty shoulders. In his anguish and his fervor he has turned to the Bible. The Book of First Samuel, Chapter 18, wherein

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David slays two hundred Philistine men and brings their foreskins to King Saul (who had only requested a hundred) as dowry for his daughter Michal's hand in marriage. What King Saul wants with so many foreskins, what he does with them, is not mentioned. Lydell can only speculate. Reading the Holy Scriptures has him in a barbaric, morbidly Old Testament mood.

King Saul might have made a tapestry of them, sewn together with the finest threads.

Or a flag, a battle standard to be borne against the heathen armies.

A patchwork quilt.

A bridal veil.

A blanket for his wives.

While fresh, he could have used them as grafts for poorly healing wounds.

Once dried, as snack food for the troops, like pemmican.

Or party favors.

Or rewards for jobs well done.

Yahweh, God in Heaven, God of Lydell's father and his father's father, is an angry God. He is a spiteful God, a savage God, a vengeful God. But He is a smart and clever God, too.

Lydell has one more thought. One that King Solomon, son of David and grandson of Saul, might have approved of. Solomon with whom he feels kinship, Solomon the wise and understanding, Solomon the just. Solomon who in his later years forsook his religion for that of his wives. Solomon who, smitten with love, turned from Judaism to the pagan faith.

A foreskin can be re-attached. Not one cut off in a fly-infested battlefield and carried for days by camel in a rank and grimy sack, but a fresh one, a hygienically removed one, a pretty pink virginal one. There are doctors, cosmetologists, who will do anything for a price. If Lydell can't get his son into the fold, he can join him on the outside. It would be an act of atonement. A day to remember. A yom kippur.

XI. Visions of Grandeur

He wanted to touch her. He wanted to run his hand down the crease

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in her buttocks. Smell her, lick her, slather his body with her tart and liquidy self.

He thrilled at the thought of it, the temptation.

He wondered if this was the mania. If it was, he could wash his hands of responsibility. You couldn't blame a person for being ill.

Besides, he was serving Flora.

Patient, loving, flint-eyed Flora. Faithful Flora, who gave him all the slack he needed.

XII. Onan the Barbarian

It was Flora, incidentally, who alerted me to a recent survey of Net users that found ten times as many synonyms for male, as compared to female, masturbation. She was doing research for a book on gender and technology. While not particularly surprised at the disparity, she did find it rather offensive. She was also somewhat dismayed.

Religion, politics, and humor were common themes among the more than two hundred male-oriented entries, although a good number seemed chosen solely on the basis of alliteration or rhyme. As for women, the themes ranged from the pedestrian to the sweepingly grandiose, from the Biblical to the sublime. Among the examples: "doing my nails," "parting the Red Sea," "surfing the channel," and "flicking the bean." And, of course, that old metaphysical standby, "nulling the void."

Flora makes a good point. The list, while notable, is decidedly short. Is this because women masturbate less than men? A common belief, but one that is unsupported by the data. Is it because they talk about it less? Again, the data say no. Could it be they simply didn't participate in the poll?

Or have we been silenced? (We, I say, for I take this quite personally — an injustice to one is an injustice to all.) Shamefully silenced, I might add, our lips sewn together by the threads of inequity, our tongues disenfranchised from the very words we would use to express our self-love.

We may not "tease the weasel," we keepers of the flame. (Why on earth would we ever do that?) We may not "tug the slug" or "pump the python." Nor, routinely, do we "bop the bishop" or "make the bald man puke." But listen. We surely burp the baby, we toss the salad, we choke the chicken, we pop the cork, and at least every few weeks we whip up a batch

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of instant pudding. And yes, oh yes, we do sometimes have sex with someone we love.

We've been silenced, I say! Robbed of speech (if not thought), cheated in all the ways we have always been cheated.

Tickling the taco. Brushing the beaver. Making soup. Rolling the dough.

Is this what they think we do all day? Imagine. It's outrageous.

We are more than homebodies. More than domestics. More than mothers and whores.

We need to rise up. The time has come to null the void and give these words a second meaning, a meaning more powerful and self-fulfilling than staying home to surf the channel or idly flick the bean. We can brush the beaver later, ladies. The void needs nulling now.

We need to be creative. On behalf of Flora and everyone else who has ever felt the yoke of inequality, I incite you: soar above your own Mt. Baldy. Be irreverent. Be enticing. Pound the peanut. Pick the peony. Wave to Dr. Kitty. Laugh out loud.

Send your words and phrases, your ditties and your doggerel, your witty little euphemisms and inventions, your unchained melodies to me. Send them quickly. Send them to my web site. Everyone's a poet.

Send them now.

XIII. underwaterworld

The children were diving for hoops. Slapping the water, struggling downward to the bottom of the pool, then splashing to the surface like puppies.

— I'm happy with my choices, she said. —All in all.

— I'm happy we met, he replied.

She waved to one of her sons, who had succeeded in getting a ring.

— No? he asked.

— Yes, she said.

— Outside of my wife I've never had an intimate female friend.

She waved to her other son, who was poised on the edge of the pool, building up the nerve to leap.

— You're a beautiful woman.

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— Don't, she said.

— I'm only observing.

She fell silent.

He told her not to worry. He was impotent.

This interested her.

He thought it might. Not entirely impotent, he added. Lately, he'd been having signs of life.

She changed the subject.

The book group had been reading Dante. She told him of a dream she had.

— We were pilloried outside the gates of Macy's.

— The gates?

— The gates, the doors. Whatever. You on one side, me on the other.

— Which store?

It was an irrelevant question, but somehow he made it seem otherwise.

— The one in Stonestown.

— Busy day?

— Very. We were naked.

— How embarrassing.

— Yes. Exceedingly.

— What was our crime?

— Swimming.

— Swimming naked?

— No, just swimming.

— That's it?

— Yes.

— Swimming's no crime.

— It wasn't the swimming, she said. —It was the fun.

XIV. The Art of Compromise

Judith had been thinking. Maybe Lydell was right. Not that Ernest should be circumcised, but that he at least should be talked to. Presented with the options. Sounded out.

She spoke to him alone one day after school. He was in his room, playing with his pet. Or rather stroking her fur and comforting her. The

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tumor was now enormous. The days of the entity known as Snowflake, at least on Earth, were clearly numbered.

Ernest, unlike his brother Max, was not a verbal child. He came across as rather distant. But he never missed a word that was said. He absorbed and processed everything. His mind was as facile as anyone's, and his inner world was deep.

He listened intently to his mother, and when she finished, surprised her by saying he wanted to have the circumcision done. She asked him why.

— Because, he said.

She pressed him. — Because why?

He hesitated a moment. — Because I deserve it.

It was an ambiguous statement, and one that begged an explanation. First, however, she reiterated that in her eyes, in everyone's eyes, he was fine — he was perfect — just the way he was.

— I want to be like everybody else, he said.

— The world's a big place. Everybody's different.

— I don't want to be.

Her heart went out to him. — I understand, she said.

He asked if it would hurt. She said it would. He said he didn't want anyone to know.

— Not Max?

He didn't mean Max.

— I'll have to tell your father, she said.

— Let's surprise him, said Ernest.

— I don't think he'd like that.

— It's my choice, isn't that what you said?

— To a point, said his mother.

— It's private, he said. —Between you and me. Like between you and that man.

— What man?

Ernest averted his eyes. — You know.

XV. The Sweet Embraceable

You can put yourself in someone else's shoes, you can even get inside their shirt and pants, but it doesn't mean you know them. It's guesswork

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who they are and what they're thinking and feeling. Guesswork and maybe intuition. As an outsider, you do your level best, but you never really know.

It's what they say and do, not think. If a guy says he's faithful, despite the fact he's getting hard-ons plotting how to get some chick in bed, he's faithful. If a woman says she's faithful, despite the fact she's sitting squarely on the fence, she's faithful.

If they don't touch, they're faithful. If they don't think, they're dead.

The two of them didn't touch. I mentioned that already. Not at the pool or anywhere else. Not once.

Wait a minute. I forgot. They did touch. But only once.

It happened in a neighborhood café. They had a date, a nighttime assignation. The kids were tucked at home in bed.

The swimming lessons had been over for several weeks. They'd spoken once by phone but hadn't seen each other. He was carrying a briefcase in one hand. With the other he touched her palm in greeting. Lightly, like a whisper, or a veil. Imperceptibly, she caught her breath. She let the contact linger.

He said, — I've been thinking of you.

She said, — Did you get my letter?

— No, he said.

They took a table in the corner, ordered coffee and dessert.

— I've started to paint again, she said.

— How wonderful, he replied.

— Watercolors. I used to paint with them a lot.

— What made you start again? he asked.

— You, she said.

His penis stirred.

— I've given myself two hours a week. Not much, but it's a start.

— A start is all you need.

— I told you in the letter. I'm surprised you didn't get it.

— You could have called, he said.

She had wanted to. But in the wanting knew she shouldn't.

He said, — I've been painting, too. Drawing really. Cartoons. Of us.

Her heart sped up. She got a little nervous. "Us" had never been mentioned before. "Us" to her meant husband and wife.

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— I'd like to see them.

He told her they were pornographic. He'd brought them with him.

— I think they'll turn you on, he said.

She hesitated. — Well then, maybe not.

— They do me, he added.

He could have said "you," not "they." He had before, or almost.

Then again, he could have brought a carriage drawn by horses. He could have brought a slipper.

She had to smile. How uninvited certain thoughts were. How willful.

— Do you do drawings of your wife? she asked.

The question gave him pause. — On occasion. Why do you ask?

— Cartoons? Pornographic ones?

The motive behind the question now seemed clear. He shrugged.

— I don't want anyone getting hurt, she said.

— No one's been hurt, he said. And then, — I don't either.

She wanted to see the pictures. Itched to see them.

Equally, she was determined not to compromise her marriage. Not to act dishonorably. She wondered what behavior this allowed.

She felt torn.

He said, — I'm sorry. I didn't mean to cause you grief.

He said, — I didn't mean to tempt you.

He was wearing silver that night. A silver chain around his neck. A silver earring. A silver bracelet, the same he'd worn the day that they first met.

He had washed his hair in chamomile shampoo. He had used a scented body soap.

He said, — I'm wrong. I have been tempting you.

She felt the truth in this. — Why?

— To see how far you'll go. To test your limits.

— Why?

— Because I don't trust mine.

— And mine you do? She didn't know whether to be flattered or insulted. — You're daring me to be unfaithful? Is that it?

— No, he said. — I'm daring you not to be.

How puerile, she thought. How unappealing and crude.

He didn't care for her. She saw this plainly now. Nor did she care for him.

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It came as something of a revelation. As did what followed: they cared for each other equally.

How remarkable, she thought. How apposite.

— Show me the pictures, she said.

He took a folder from his briefcase and handed it to her. His penis, which had defervesced, showed signs of life.

She stuffed the folder in her purse. — I'll look at them later.

— They're yours, he said. — Keep them. Look at them whenever.

It was the last they were to see of each other. Both knew it.

She wanted to give him something in return.

— A hug, he suggested.

She thought it over. Rising, she pulled on her coat.

— I'll say no to that, she said.

He had risen also, expectantly. Now he felt cheated, and incomplete.

— Take it home, she said.

— Take what home?

— That impulse. That hug. Take it home and give it to your wife.

These were her parting words.

Upon thinking them over, he found, astonishingly, that they were exactly what he wanted to hear.

XVI. The Gift of the Magi

Solomon was wise, but he wasn't all wise. Lydell was crazy, but his motives were pure.

He had the operation. He did it in secret. While he was healing, he dressed and undressed in private. To forestall questions and minimize discomfort, he slept with his back to his wife.

Judith assumed she was being punished for her philandering. Never mind that she had resisted, that she in the end had proved stalwart and faithful. Adultery was as much of the mind as of the body. Her husband might not know the details, but he had doubtlessly suffered. Had the roles been reversed, she would have suffered, too.

She swallowed her pride one night and asked his forgiveness.

— For what? he replied.

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— For being so uninvolved, she said, thinking it best to break the truth to him slowly, by degrees. — So distant.

Lydell was nonplussed. — For that I should be asking yours.

She asked what he meant.

It was he who had been remote, he said, impossibly, insupportably so. Remote and self-absorbed. But all that was going to change.

— Are you going to touch me? she asked.

— There's a reason I haven't.

— I know, but are you?

— Yes, he said. — Oh yes. Most definitely.

— Anytime soon?

He gave her a smile. — I have a surprise, he said, with a look that made her just the tiniest bit nervous.

They were in the bedroom. Ernest, who was still a little sore from his own operation, was watching TV in the room next door. She'd been wondering how to break the news to her husband. Maybe now was the time.

— I have one, too.

— How perfect, he said.

That would not have been her word for it. Bracing herself, she told him about Ernest.

He was stunned. Thinking what the hell, she told him secret number two: she'd had Snowflake put to sleep.

Before, he would have gotten angry, possibly furious, but now he simply nodded. As if to say, of course, how fitting. As if he finally understood. Moments later, having recovered his voice, he told her — and showed her— what he himself had done.

— Love made me do it, he said, bemused, contrite. And then, — I'm a fool.

— No, you're not, she said. — No more than me.

They both were fools. And both, she felt, deserved a place of honor in their marriage.

She hugged him close. He hugged her back.

— It doesn't hurt, he said.

She was glad of this.

— It feels nice, he said.

She felt the same.

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XVII. The 17 Questions

How is a story told? With flesh and blood people, and a beginning, middle and end.

How is it held together? Imperfectly.

With what is it held? Epoxy and wire and glue, balls of string, strings of words, paste.

For whom is it told? The willing.

To what value? Submission.

At what price? An hour's worth of television.

Is there a purpose? Yes.

What is the purpose? The purpose is hidden.

What are the prominent symbols? The foreskin stands for the natural world and the untrammeled innocence of man. The circumcised penis is lost innocence, civilization. The skullcap is the foreskin re-found.

Are there other metaphors? Yes. The pool is the Garden of Eden. The rat is Fate. The multiple short chapters represent our fragmented world. The varying voices are false prophets. The title, Fidelity, is the name of a bank.

Can we read this story in parts, at separate sittings? It is inadvisable. Like foreplay, there is a cumulative effect.

Why all the sexual references? This is Biblical.

What happens to Judith and Lydell? Both are strengthened by their trials and tribulations. Judith lands a lucrative business contract. She and her book group tackle *The Prologemena to a Future Metaphysics* by Immanuel Kant. Lydell visits Israel. In a bizarre case of mistaken identity, he is abducted by a group of Palestinian freedom fighters, then later released.

And the boys? Max becomes a lawyer. Ernest, a veterinarian.

What about Wade? Wade is currently back on drugs and doing quite well.

And the rat? She lives in Heaven.

And the moral? Life and death are ruled by Nature,
Foolishness and faith, by man.
Between the God of Moses and Temptation,
You do the best you can. ☙

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Dear Reader, Go right ahead and read this story...but don't say I didn't warn you.
—Cassandra

Pandora's Box — Open with Care

By Robert Sheckley

IT WAS A BEAUTIFUL PLANET, with balmy breezes, a benevolent ocean, beautiful mountains, cool glades, and grassy meadows. The nicest thing was, there was not a soul there. Or rather, there were only souls there. Souls, but no people. Not a single human being. But there were plenty of spirits.

Impalpable, transparent, ineffable, ubiquitous, the spirits were everywhere. The soul of the west wind played over the meadows, rustling the grain that had no one to harvest it. The grapes grew heavy on the vine, and the light-hearted spirit of the grape presided over their ripening. There was a spirit for everything, and everything had its spirit. In the distant mountains, volcanoes exploded from time to time, not of their own accord, but due to the whim of the volcano god, who caused the hot lava to burst out and flow down onto the plain. Beneath that fiery surge, the grass died, but it was not forgotten. A god of grass saw that there should be more grass to replace it. Storms swept through in accord with the commands of the storm god. Rocks toppled from high peaks in obedience to the commands of The Trickster. Rivers overflowed their banks and changed their courses when Proteus commanded it.

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Since there was no human there to object, none of it was damaging, in the long run. Everything grew again, and a spirit presided over each thing. There was destruction and there was creation, and all of it was in balance.

But one day, something different happened, something that had never happened before. There was a flash of light in the early morning sky, a flash not accounted for by any god or spirit. The light burned steady and it hung for a while in the sky, then it disappeared. After a while, an observer, if there had been one, would have seen an object falling from above.

It fell slowly and settled gently to the ground. It was a metal box.

The elemental spirits came from all over to look at this box. They took a lively interest in what was going on. They even took on shape to observe more closely. Most of these elementals looked like children, but actually they were very old. They had been around for a long time. But they'd never seen anything like this before.

A cluster of them gathered around the metal box. They had slender, semi-transparent bodies, and they wavered and glittered in the air.

"What do you think it is, Ariel?"

"I don't know, Puck. Did you ever see anything like it?"

"No. But look. It has writing on it."

"Obviously. But we can't read writing."

"Silly. Proper writing reads itself."

Puck touched the lettering. There was a sound as of someone clearing his throat. Then the box said, "I am Pandora Box 2234B second series. Open me with care."

"What do you suppose is inside?" Ariel asked. "Maybe it's toys."

"Toys aren't the only things that come in boxes," Puck said. "Maybe we should ask Prospero."

"You know what he'll say. He'll just tell us to forget it."

"Maybe that's what we ought to do."

"But this box is new! It's a new thing! And we haven't had anything new in a long time!"

"Let's ask Psyche. She'll know what to do."

Psyche was a beautiful young girl with long brown hair. She wore a simple white dress and carried a bunch of posies. You could see right through her. She appeared as soon as they mentioned her name.

"What have you got there?" Psyche asked.

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"It's a Pandora Box!" Ariel said proudly. "I found it!"

"It doesn't matter who found it," Puck said. "The question is, what, if anything, are we to do with it?"

Just then, Verna, the goddess of the harvest time, appeared in her russet gown, bearing a cornucopia overflowing with fruits and vegetables. She had the appearance of a gracious, middle-aged woman, but she was no older than the others.

She looked at the box and exclaimed, "It's here at last!"

"Were you expecting this?" Psyche asked.

"Of course! It's something I need! As a matter of fact, I sent for this."

"What's in it?" Ariel asked.

"People," Verna said.

"What did you need people for?" Puck asked.

"I haven't anyone to make a harvest for," Verna said. "And when you're goddess of harvests, that's not so good."

"What do you mean, nobody?" Puck said. "All of us love your harvests, Verna, and we tell you so."

"I know you do," Verna said, "and it's dear of you. But you, like me and the rest of us, are elemental beings. We don't eat the fruits of the Earth. What could a harvest really mean to us?"

"It's the idea that counts," Puck said.

"Sometimes that's not good enough," Verna said. "Sometimes you want the real thing: people to eat the harvest you've brought them."

Tyche, goddess of luck, must have overheard that, because she showed up all of a sudden. She was a tall lady with white wings, and she was wearing a plum-colored tunic.

"Verna's right," Tyche said. "I'm just wasting my time, because there's no one around for me to bring luck to."

"You can bring me some!" Ariel said.

"You're just saying that," Tyche said. "But you know very well that creatures like us don't need luck. What would we do with it? We're eternal qualities, and for us one day is very much like another, and each day brings just what it brings, no more and no less. We have what we need. What would we do with luck?"

"Maybe luck has brought us this box," Ariel said. "Come on, let's open it."

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There was more discussion, and more elemental creatures came to join in. They talked all day, and when it was the hour of sunset, Puck said, "This talking is all very well. But we've done enough of it, don't you think? What about we open the box now?"

And so they did it. Puck pried open the lock. Tyche broke the seal. Verna opened the top. They all peered in. And they all disappeared.

THE BOX STOOD there, a large rectangular object made of some unnatural substance, there on the meadow, with mountains in the background, and at the foot of the meadow, the blue reflection of a stream.

Something within the box moved. A hand appeared at the edge. Then a head. The head lifted, peered out. Then the man pulled himself out of the box and tumbled to the ground.

Behind him came a woman. And another behind her.

Then ten, twenty, a hundred came piling out. Another hundred. And hundreds after that.

The last man out wore a blue uniform and had a cap with gold leaf on it. In universal symbol language, this meant he was in charge.

He carried a megaphone. That meant something, too.

"All right, folks, listen up," he said to the occupants of the box. "We've made it. We've escaped the destruction of Earth. Our Pandora Box has carried us out through space, and has made a safe landing on a friendly world."

A woman came up to him. From her confident air, you could tell that she was in charge of everything the captain was not in charge of.

"It's a nice-looking place," she said. "I wonder if it has good vibes."

He frowned at her. "Now, Myra, what kind of talk is that? Vibes? How could a new world have any vibes at all?"

"I thought they might be built in," she said. "Come with the place, so to speak."

"You're talking about things like gods and demons, and influences, and personified stuff like the Wild West Wind or the Angry Ocean?"

She nodded. "That's the sort of stuff I mean."

"Forget it. That was part of old Earth. We're starting over here. The influences haven't arrived yet. We're on our own. We make our own luck."

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"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure. We all know that the gods are human inventions. We'll make do without them."

The woman nodded. There had never been any use arguing with him. But what if he was wrong? What if the gods came first, and then the humans?

But if that was the case, where were the gods?

Where was Ariel, where was Puck, and Verna, and all the others? Where was Good Luck and Bad? Where was the Spirit of Invention, the Soul of Progress, and the Shadow of Death?

Far away, in an aethereal middle distance, a group of qualities as light as gossamar were flying toward the sun.

"They're calling us!" Verna said.

"Forget them," Puck said. "These people are determined to make their own luck."

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A Scientist's Notebook

GREGORY BENFORD

RISKS AND REALITIES

IN MARCH 2000 NASA decided to ditch one of its primary research satellites. It will be gone by the time you read this, its orbit deliberately lowered until it dives into the Pacific Ocean.

How come? Because the second of its three gyros is failing, the first already gone, and with only one left the satellite will be unmanageable. In time, left alone, it would spiral into the atmosphere anyway, slamming several big car-sized chunks into the surface. But the observatory satellite, which has pioneered our view of the universe seen in the gamma-ray high-energy portion of the spectrum, could carry on for at least several more months before the second gyroscope dies.

NASA made their decision based on the risk to those below. The odds of injuring anybody? — less than one in a million, depending on exactly what assumptions you make going into the calculation.

Is the yield to science worth such a chance? A NASA spokesman said, "Any risk is unacceptable," which I take as the usual media hyperbole.

Still, such questions arise constantly in our technological world. In my last column I dealt with the Mars probe failures, but the element of risk appends to every human activity.

We often forget this, demanding that something be "safe" when nothing ever truly is. As you sit reading this, probably indoors, radon gas accumulates in the room with you. In many homes it probably yields a higher level of radioactivity than if you were sitting right on top of a nuclear waste storage facility.

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And don't forget that at any moment, a meteorite could hammer down through the atmosphere and squash you. (Only one person has verifiably been hit by one, a woman lying in bed in Alabama.)

So what does a scientist make of such quandaries? I could react with a dry numerical analysis of the trade-offs involved with the satellite, knowledge vs. danger, but that would miss the most important aspect: human emotion.

As we evolved, with only crude technology, disaster was always natural — floods, storms, plagues.

Consider earthquakes, nowadays the universal fear of Californians. To nomads who lived on the land, without the comforts of houses, they were once no more troubling than a passing squall. With technology and the advance of comforting domesticity came disaster of a different kind — self-engendered. It is our Faustian bottom line.

Alas, techno-risk brings with it the vexing problem of risk assessment. In 1900, the average lifetime in the U.S.A. for both men and women was 48 years; now it's about 75. (The longevity value of simply being female is about 7 more years now than the average male.)

Science has been so successful in giving us years, we now seem to brood darkly on the possibility that it will, through accident and environmental effects, subtract a bit. We pass on from more protracted causes now, too, as a recent *New Yorker* cartoon showed: two old people talking, and one says, "In my day, people used to just die."

Lawyers argue their cases as though the world should rightly guarantee us all a life free of any chance of accident — and if something bad happens, it must be somebody else's fault.

That attitude arises because juries welcome it. Their perceptions of risk color courtroom judgments and public policy alike, but seldom very rationally (i.e., seldom with any quantitative sense).

Our perceptions differ greatly. In Table 1 the opinions of different groups appear, including experts who know statistics. It shows daunting differences.

Notice how nuclear power takes a beating in the eyes of the reasonably aware public. Apparently, TV and movies have told most of us for so long that nukes are very bad, and we have absorbed the message. Never mind that nobody in Europe or North America has ever died of the effects of nuclear power generation.

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Activity or Technology	League of Woman Voters	College Students	Experts
Nuclear Power	1	1	20
Motor Vehicles	2	5	1
Handguns	3	2	4
Smoking	4	3	2
Motorcycles	5	6	6
Alcoholic Beverages	6	7	3
General (private aviator)	7	15	12
Police Work	8	8	17
Pesticides	9	4	8
Surgery	10	11	5

Table 1

Ordering of perceived risk for 10 activities and technologies. The ordering is based on the average (geometric mean) risk ratings within each group. Rank 1 represents the most risky activity or technology.

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Cop shows make police work look more risky than it is. If you've ever spent much time with real cops, you find that they are very careful people. I knew one who wore his bulletproof vest to ordinary civilian events.

Interestingly, all the hospital shows seem to have reassured the public about the dangers of surgery. Having just barely survived a burst appendix 15 years ago, the bottom line of Table 1 looks to me very much like the metaphorical bottom line, too.

The public has a fairly reasonable idea of the risks from smoking and handguns, agreeing with the experts who know the numbers. This may help explain why attack lawyers have gotten away with assaulting the manufacturers of these products, extorting hundreds of billions of dollars (and several billions for themselves, of course) for the sin of providing products that adults bought of their own free will. In the case of cigarettes, there was even a big warning label on the box. No matter; tobacco has become an evil, so those who provide it are, too.

Risk has some funny side effects. We may see those who provide other health-risk products like red meat or alcohol or dairy fats soon enough dragged into court, as if we had never heard that these things brought on heart attacks or cancer.

Notice that the experts know alcohol poses a big risk, but the public discounts it, apparently because it makes us feel good. I drink about a bottle of wine a day, plainly far over into the risky level, but do I care? Nope. But I agree with the experts. I simply take the risk, knowingly.

So, unsurprisingly, the public doesn't think like the experts. It's not as though they've ever been schooled in the elementary calculations one needs to make comparisons. The media pictures they get of disaster stress spectacle. Good footage overrules careful weighing of alternatives.

Also, paranoia is the simple plot device. Want an instant bad guy? Oil and nuclear power companies serve nicely. They are symptomatic of faceless, impersonal institutions. The public responds to these shorthand methods, and draws the wrong conclusions.

But what of the experts?

I've spent a fair amount of time in the company of risk assessors, and it's striking that so much of their work concerns air safety. Yet only one death occurs per billion

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passenger miles, yielding a few hundred per year in the U.S.A. (This, versus 150 deaths/day for auto accidents, and 100 deaths/day from smoking for the whole U. S. A. population.) The odds of dying are 1/10,000 per year for frequent flyers — comparable to the murder and suicide risk in the general population.

The average car driver must travel about 100 million miles to incur a 50-50 risk of dying in a crash. By airplane, the odds are ten times better: one in a billion miles. Yet we hear about air crashes a lot more than auto wrecks.

I think that concern with air safety is great because the rational, intellectual classes fly often. It's so quantifiable, so high-tech, so clean an issue. And "we" (the experts) do harbor some fear of flying. Never mind that we know that Bernoulli's equation explains why planes stay up — I teach that stuff, and still I occasionally feel a primate fear, gazing down from a dizzying height. (Though taxi cabs terrify me more, especially in New York.)

I suspect that the crucial issue here is *control*. We're helpless in an airplane, suspended at 35,000 feet. Cars we drive ourselves, trusting in our skills. People want to rely on themselves. Trusting a professional pilot makes little difference; we want to be masters of our fate.

This attitude extends to technology generally. Old is good; we think we know it, and thus it is safer. Generally, we fear new technology and shrug our shoulders at old risks. Time-honored, they seem homey. Railroad travel is more risky than airplanes, and cars are much worse. Yet few fear climbing into their own car, or boarding the Amtrak.

No, it's the *newness* that puts us off. As science fictional people, this should worry us. It amounts to a bias against the future.

What, then, of nuclear power, that long-ago symbol of the future?

Chernobyl has yielded 31 dead already from direct effects. Among the 24,000 living between 3 and 15 kilometers of the plant, a simple projection from the dose rate they got gives 131 added cancers in that population. That is a 2.6% increase in the expected number. If they all smoked — and a majority did, actually — that would give a 30% increase.

Ah, but what of the future? Considering the 75 million exposed in the Ukraine and Byelorussia, we get about 3,500 extra cancers, summed up over their entire lives.

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Sounds like a lot. But this is only a 0.0047% increase in the expected 15 million cancers they should have in future.

Newspaper headline, front page:

3500 DEAD FROM CHERNOBYL.

Or, taking the other tack, there's a small item at the bottom of page 35 of that same newspaper:

CHERNOBYL CANCER RATE
"INFINITESIMAL PERCENTAGE"
SAYS PHYSICIST.
ENVIRONMENTAL GROUPS
ATTACK HIM.

Okay, I favor the guy in the second headline. Still....

Which one of these methods is "right?"

Neither — they just weigh different aspects of the problem. But it's clear how the media play the game.

Nuclear power provides a need that will be met somehow, after all. In North America it has lost the battle for public opinion. In Europe there is a regional schizophrenia. The French generate most of their electricity in nuclear plants, and have never had any big, risky events. Yet most of the rest of the western Europeans are trying to shut down the reactors they have. In Eastern Europe, reactors get a better perception. Even the Russians continue on with their extensive program, probably because they have so much invested.

Burning oil and coal, on the other hand, kills about 10,000 people per year in the U.S.A. from increased lung cancer and emphysema. This number has been known from careful NIH studies for decades. Nobody gets excited about those deaths, ever...except the relatives, of course.

Thus "no nukes" may well recall the old saying: For every complex problem there is a solution that is simple, appealing — and wrong. So why do people feel so strongly?

Part of the problem is that we think only of showy disasters — thanks, Hollywood — while ignoring everyday dangers. In Table 2 I've listed some common carcinogen agents and their estimated dangers.

Here, "Risk" assumes that humans are like rats, as far as response to the environment goes. Human response to carcinogens is taken as linear in the dose received — directly proportional, with no weird

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TABLE 2: INVISIBLE EVERYDAY RISKS

	Carcinogen Exposure/Day
Tap Water	1
Well Water, Contaminated, Silicon Valley	4
Swimming Pool, 1 Hour (Child)	8
Formaldehyde in Workplace Daily	5,800
Home Air (14 hr/day)	6,000
Mobile Home Air (14 hr/day)	21,000
PCBs in Diet	2
Bacon, 100 gr. cooked	3
Comfrey Herb Tea	30
Peanut Butter Sandwich	30
Brown Mustard, 5 gr.	70
Basil, 2 gr.	100
Diet Cola	60
Beer, 12 oz.	2,800
Wine, 0.25 liter	4,700

factors. A rating of 1 means a substance will induce tumors in one rat lifetime. This dose is then scaled to human daily use. Wine is 4700 times more likely to give you cancer than tap water, even if you live in LA.

The huge risk from mobile home air comes from the outgassing of the plastics used in cushions and carpeting. Home air is chancy for these reasons, plus the radon gas that leaks up from naturally decaying radium in the soil. Many artificial materials decay into formaldehyde, which is tough on lungs. The best solution for all these places is to open a window.

Swimming pools have chlorine, a carcinogen. Plenty of common foods contain the cancer-causing agents plants evolved long ago to defend themselves against insects and animals. The most successful can even induce a zesty taste when nibbled by big animals like us — they're our spices. A hugely successful example is the tobacco plant — instant poison to many insects, a stimulant to big guys like us.

There are some subtle problems with this approach to cancer

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threat analysis, but it probably yields useful approximations.

All this data assumes that you can generalize from rats exposed to, say, a heavy dose of diet cola. People drink little of it, weighed by the human/mouse body weight, but you have to start somewhere. (I hate most sweeteners, myself, and it's pleasant to know they cause cancer. But then, everything seems to.) These are big assumptions, but common ones in the risk-measuring business. Without them, there would be little to say. Keep that in mind.

Peanut butter, that homey symbol of health, has fungal poisons called aflatoxins in it which cause cancer in rats — and presumably, us, though no study is ever going to be able to pry that one factor loose from all the myriad dietary patterns we have.

Assessing such risks is hard because the "insult" takes decades to display a final cancer. Epidemiology doesn't give easy estimates of "how safe" anything is. Comparing one risk to another is simple — but it tells you nothing about how close to "zero risk" — which really doesn't exist, of course — that you should go, or how to assess the costs of countermeasures.

* * *

Plus, there's that sneaky assumption of linear response....

An example: Years ago, British Rail decided to improve safety standards on their commuter lines. To cover costs they had to raise ticket rates. Safety comes at a price, and somebody pays.

This measure drove some commuters to use their cars, lowering net revenue for Brit Rail — and, since car travel is about 1,000 times more dangerous than rail transport, the "safety upgrade" increased injuries and deaths among the commuters. This is a classic example of how nonlinear effects must be included in cost/benefit analysis.

Further, Table 2 shows that the popular notion of a benign nature, where evolution has equipped us to cope perfectly with natural toxic chemicals, is wrong.

After all, natural selection doesn't care about toxic threats to us after we've reproduced. Also, many of our defenses are general. We shed the surface cells of our digestive and lung systems every day, presumably to protect against ordinary "insults."

We produce antitoxin enzymes and myriad defenses, but they can be damaged by other environmental effects, too. Finally, we eat many things our ancestors of only a few

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centuries back did not — potatoes, coffee, tomatoes, kiwi fruit. Evolution can't have defended us against them yet.

Further, our own systems betray us by making hydrogen peroxide and other reactive compounds of oxygen, which probably contribute to aging and cancer. The only way to avoid that is to stop breathing.

We ingest at least 10,000 times more *natural* pesticides (toxins) by weight than we do man-made ones. Natural ain't necessarily safer. The nation with the longest life expectancy is Japan, an urban, extremely crowded industrial land. (But the safest state in the union is Hawaii. Maybe the slower pace helps? Yet another reason to move there.)

Take a common way of presenting risk information — the comparison. Pithy, concrete, convincing.

"Smoking two packs of cigarettes gives the same risk as a year spent breathing Los Angeles air." What are we to make of such facts, thrown at us by the risk-managers? Should we be rational as the risk-assessors define it?

First, there's no need to be. It's painfully obvious that the orderly, engineering mentality does not always lead to lowest possible risk.

Look at nuclear reactor control rooms — banks of switches in bleached lighting. The most trivial switch looks much the same as the vital one. There are no personal touches to the room, no odd markers allowed. This guarantees that bureaucrats like the looks (so clean, neat, reassuring) — and the people who work there hate it.

An impersonal, "professional" look causes just the boredom that is the enemy of look-sharp safety. A few years ago the crew manning one control room put pull-levers from beer dispensers on the vital controls, so they could see them right away in a crisis. ("Running hot — go for the Bud!")

Good idea. Their manager angrily removed them.

What to do?

The future must allow more human environments in high-tech enterprises. The pyramid structure familiar in industrial firms has to be discarded, so that highly integrated teams, with real team spirit, run the show. And they have to be tested regularly, against each other, to sharpen their performance.

All well and good — the perfect nerd environment is perhaps not the safest. But what of the grand conflict between the "irrational" public and the risk-statistics folk?

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First, we have to recognize that the perceived risk is not merely proportional to the number of people hurt or killed.

Three Mile Island surely proved this. No other accident in our history has had such costly social impact. It imposed huge costs on the utility and nuclear power industries, increased the use of dangerous oil and even coal, and prompted a more hostile view of other complex technologies (chemical manufacturing, genetic engineering).

How to explain this? Sure, the media tart up the news — but why does such sensationalism work?

I believe the most important index in these spectacular disasters is what they portend. Train wrecks kill many, but they are ordinary and excite few. As the *New Yorker* said after the Bhopal catastrophe,

> What truly grips us in these accounts is not so much the numbers as the spectacle of suddenly vanishing competence, of men utterly routed by technology, of fail-safe systems failing with a logic as inexorable as it was once — indeed, right up until that very moment — unforeseeable. And the spectacle haunts us because it seems to carry allegorical import, like the whispery omen of a hovering figure.

Mt. St. Helens got less press than Chernobyl because it didn't *mean* very much. This is what the analysts imply when they speak of "psychometric factor spaces" in assessing the impact of events. DNA technology awakens many of the deep fears that nuclear power does, invading "factor spaces" that train wrecks never touch.

To many people, bland expert testimony that the annual risk from living near a nuclear power plant is equivalent to the risk of riding an extra three miles in a car is simply dumb — it omits the dimensions of human lives affected by the failure of so gargantuan a technology.

Yet we all know life is nothing without risk. It would be dull, gray, leached of zest. As Hal Lewis, the dean of nuclear safety experts and author of *Technological Risk*, has remarked, reflect on how western civilization would be if we had elected to make the minimization of all risks our principal motivation. We'd be bored — and then extinct.

Indeed, we get bored with risk itself. This may be why older technologies seem safer than they really are.

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So we use stairs despite the risk of falls. (I do as a habit, to stay in physical conditioning.)

We eat canned food, despite occasional botulism. (I prefer fresh food, but not because of risk.)

We climb mountains. (The riskiest sport of all is climbing in the Himalayas, where one in ten die.)

We make love despite heart attack risk. We don't make love, despite the fact that married men live longer than singles.

Given our everyday acceptance of risk — indeed, open foolhardiness in smoking or in driving long commutes — why do we balk at nuclear plants, for example?

I have a guess, and it will be as true in the future as it is now.

Every storyteller knows that there are two crucial points in a narrative. One is the opener, the hook, where you draw the audience in. Even more important is the finish, which has to satisfy the tensions the story has set up. But one tension audiences expect will be released (though they probably couldn't say so consciously) is finally expressed in the question, What's it mean?

The best narratives tell us what human experience signifies, what our lives are worth, what role we play (if any) against a larger canvas (if any).

We instinctively dislike stories that lower our estimate of what human lives mean. Audiences prefer dramas about rich, beautiful, powerful people, rather than barflies and beggars — these people matter. Similarly, we deplore disasters that seem to rob us of our self worth.

In ancient times, weather and the gods made disasters. Now we make them, for we are lords of the biosphere.

I propose that the myriad small deaths from disease, tornadoes, falls, or even from train wrecks, all seem to us "natural." Dying of something nature makes, whether it's a microbe or a meteor, has about it a strange sense of harmony. This at least carries a freight of consoling meaning. And eventually we assign old, familiar technology to the category of "natural."

Death from new technology that we do not understand carries a taint of being self-inflicted, almost of unintentional suicide. This is especially true if we cannot control the new technology personally, relying on unseen experts — that pilot up ahead in the cockpit, say.

Techno-accident demeans all

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life by making it appear trivially spent.

Another aspect: It may well be that the most important feature of modern times is not technology, but the fact that we dwell in the first era in which atheist ideas are commonly (though not universally) accepted.

Disaster means something if it comes from God or, failing that, at least from nature. Techno-disasters can't be rationalized this way, because we have only ourselves to blame.

So, deploring the public's irrational views of risk, as some number-crunching experts do, can miss a vital point. People seek to invest event with *meaning* — they want more from risk assessment than body counts.

And if they die in their cars, while in full control — well, that's life, isn't it?

Knowing this, do we who have a hand in evaluating disasters have an obligation to cater to these psychodynamic needs?

To some extent, yes — but we cannot simply rubber-stamp measures which divert society's attention from the serious threats, such as tobacco or saturated fats.

A larger aspect: It has been plausibly argued that we are spending a million times more per life to save people from side effects of nuclear power than we are to save sick children in the undeveloped world. This sort of comparison can't be allowed to escape the disaster-dazed media audience.

More, we cannot concentrate on arguing about rare but spectacular disasters, like nuclear power, to the neglect of everyday deaths. That would merely play into the media-driven perception of safety as solely a matter of gaudy spectaculars.

No, I'm afraid that our moral obligation is to treat every separate life as important — to acknowledge the public's easy distraction by huge disasters, but remind them of the small ones — and to thus in our own way give each life meaning.

Comments on this column welcome at gbenford@uci.edu, or Physics Dept., Univ. Calif., Irvine, CA 92717

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Sheila Finch's last few stories for us have been chronicles of the Lingsters—a guild of xenolinguists attempting to bridge the galaxies. This new one belongs in the same series, but as you'll soon see, its approach is a bit different...

Ms. Finch reports that she has been taking time off from science fiction to work on a Young Adult mystery currently entitled Heart Like a Bear, *but we expect she'll return soon with more entertaining sf stories like this one.*

Nor Unbuild the Cage

By Sheila Finch

THE SCAR APPEARED ON the Eye at the time of Rain-Catcher's birthing.

"Does the Eye fight?" Rain-Catcher asked her first mate.

"How could that be?" Den-Builder said. "Who could reach the Eye?"

Rain-Catcher and her first mate curled together in the ternary's den under Middle Hill, arm to arm and leg to leg, waiting for the Eye to close and the breath of darkness to cool Here.

"The youngling within slows your thought, Rain-Catcher." He patted her swollen belly. "Mine," he added.

Rain-Catcher thought her mate slow to understand but she said nothing. Nictitating membranes slid across her round eyes as she squinted through the narrow entrance. The Eye was too brilliant to look at for more than a blink. Slowly closing now, it still flooded the rocky plains with dazzling light, and Here wavered in the heat. A dark smear was plainly visible on its upper half. Nothing had ever marked the Eye before. She felt the stab of fear.

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"Are there spirits that harm the Eye?" she asked.

"If that were so, Those-Who-Have-Gone-Over would have spoken of it."

His words gave her no comfort. Here was good to the Folk, and the Eye the source of their life. If anything harmed it, how would they live?

"I wish Night-Singer would return," Rain-Catcher said. She put both hands on her belly, all eight brown fingers splayed to keep the youngling inside until her second mate returned.

Den-Builder lifted the hollow catch-stone and dripped water on her lips. "When Night-Singer comes, he will give us the meaning."

Her tongue flickered, tasting her first mate. She released one hand from her belly and stroked him, running her fingers in and out of the brown folds of his fat and over his small ears. Almost the end of the hot season, and water and food both hard to find, yet Den-Builder was still plump as a half-grown.

The youngling kicked against her belly, anxious to be born, and Rain-Catcher gasped.

"It will not be well for the youngling to be born before Night-Singer returns," Den-Builder said in distress.

They waited for this youngling with great joy, for Rain-Catcher had been barren many seasons. Younglings were as precious as rain to the Folk and came as sparingly.

As the Eye closed, a shadow filled the den's entrance. Night-Singer, third of their ternary, was growing taller than both, and although he had only just gone over, his skin had whitened and now folded over his bones as if it belonged to some much larger being. She thought her second mate beautiful, his ears longer than her fingers, his taste like rock warmed by the Eye.

"Quick," Den-Builder said. "You have been too long gone. Sing to Rain-Catcher, for her time is near."

Night-Singer said, "I have been far beyond these hills."

"You are not wise, Night-Singer, to walk in the heat of the Eye," Den-Builder scolded.

"I fear Rain-Catcher has picked a time of bad omen. I have seen strange ones," Night-Singer said. "Not-Folk."

Rain-Catcher's heart thumped at that, and the youngling jumped in

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her belly. The fear she had felt at the sight of the scar on the Eye returned.

"Not-Folk cannot be," Den-Builder said. "You are mistaken."

She heard bitterness in her first mate's voice. She knew he had secretly hoped the change would come to his body, not Night-Singer's. The Eye caused only one male in a ternary to change, and the one not changing raised the youngling. She let him think this infant was his, but she knew in her heart it was Night-Singer who planted the seed. She had mated with Den-Builder many times and no youngling started, but with Night-Singer only once.

"Even so," Night-Singer said. "I have been among them."

"Perhaps the Not-Folk are only ternaries that live beyond these three hills," Rain-Catcher suggested. "Ternaries we never see would seem strange to us."

"If they are of the Folk, they are not strange. If they are strange, they are not of the Folk," Den-Builder said.

Night-Singer began to sing:

I have seen four-footed ones
Yet they have hands
These are ugly ones
They are covered in hair
The color of sand
Their eyes are straight
Not round like the Eye
Or the eyes of the Folk.

Those-Who-Have-Gone-Over carried the long wisdom of the Folk in their songs, but this was a stranger song than Rain-Catcher had ever heard sung. She looked at her second mate, but he spread his hands in the gesture, no meaning.

The Three Hills Folk never scratched at wounds for long. Den-Builder soon made room for Night-Singer to curl between them. When the ternary was comfortable, Rain-Catcher spoke of her fear.

"Something wounds the Eye, and Not-Folk walk Here. We must think about this together."

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"You think too much, Rain-Catcher," Den-Builder said.

At that moment the youngling determined to be born, and all three attended to its arrival. Rain-Catcher pushed, and Den-Builder patted, and Night-Singer sang. Soon it came squalling out in a rush of blood into Den-Builder's waiting hands. Den-Builder bit the cord and licked it clean. Rain-Catcher saw the infant was well-formed, with eyes clear as water that would darken as it grew and took on its sex.

When she had her breath again, the three of them carried the youngling outside the den. They stood among rocks and stones at the foot of Middle Hill, exposing its body to the night sky. Though the Eye that watched by day was fierce, the night sky was thick with pebbles of fire and only a little less bright. Sky pebbles were the Eye's younglings, she had been taught.

Night-Singer held his youngling and sang:

Sky pebbles give welcome
The Eye gives spirit
Folk not welcomed
Cannot live
And Folk without spirit
Do great harm.

When the dry season came again, the Eye would bless the infant with spirit, and it would receive its name. Then it would help the Folk, not injure. She gazed at it in Night-Singer's arms, wondering what this day of omens would bring, and could not keep from shivering.

Night-Singer was gone from the ternary for many days after the youngling's birth. The youngling grew strong and needed food, and Rain-Catcher had very little time left over to think about this.

One day, Den-Builder squinted at the Eye through a thin piece of clear black stone he had found.

"The wound grows," he told her. "It is bigger now."

She had seen enough wounds to know they grew smaller as they healed, not bigger, if they were not scratched. Cradling the youngling to her breast, she came out of the den. The air was cool, though the Eye had not yet closed. Noise boomed in the distance beyond Small Hill where mountains loomed in haze. In her memory, heat went away only when

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water fell from the sky. This noise was Rain's footsteps and gave notice of its coming. It was a good sound, yet she could not remember hearing it so many days before the season turned.

The Eye stood low in the sky. Other ternaries came out of their dens, lured by cool air to believe the Eye had closed already. One male among them cradled an infant. In a while, Rain-Catcher would give her youngling back to Den-Builder while she foraged for lichens and dug insects out of crevices. When the wet time came, food would be more plentiful. For now she was content with Here's parched grace.

"Look for yourself." Den-Builder handed her the clear black stone.

She looked. The Eye bore a smoky bruise over most of the upper half and spreading below. Horrified, she dropped the looking stone. "What does this mean?"

"We must ask Those-Who-Have-Gone-Over," Den-Builder said.

Now others pointed to the Eye's wound, murmuring together in frightened voices. No one could explain it. Den-Builder laced the youngling to his back with grass fibers padded with moss.

The Folk made their way up Tall Hill where the wise ones gathered. Rain's footsteps boomed in the air, and sometimes they were so loud she felt them in the land under her own feet, but no water fell. The wise ones of the Three Hills Folk sat in a circle at the top, white and still as the boulders.

"Why have you come here?" Far-Strider asked. He had gone over many seasons ago.

In answer, Den-Builder pointed at the Eye.

Far-Strider glanced up, his nictitating membranes flickering. "This we have seen."

"What does it mean?" Den-Builder demanded.

The Folk waited for an answer. Those-Who-Have-Gone-Over looked at each other without speaking.

At last, Oldest lifted up his long head and answered. "The Eye veils itself from us. We have offended."

The Folk slapped their hands against their heads in the sign of fear.

An old female who was Far-Strider's mate asked, "How can we please the Eye?"

"We must build a tower of stone to honor the Eye," Oldest whispered,

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his voice like dry grass. "Three times as high as one of the Folk, and so wide three ternaries cannot ring it round."

The Folk looked at each other and stretched out empty hands, fingers splayed, holding no meaning.

"A difficult task to gather enough rocks," Den-Builder said carefully. "Slow work to drag them up Tall Hill."

Oldest said, "We have sent one with this command to all the Three Hills Folk, those who live on Middle Hill and Small Hill, and even to the Folk who live beyond these hills. But the work must start at once. We cannot wait for others to arrive."

No one said anything. Those-Who-Have-Gone-Over kept the wisdom of the Folk, and Oldest was wisest of them all. The Folk never refused to follow the words of Oldest.

Then Rain-Catcher noticed something. "Where is Night-Singer?"

Far-Strider said, "Your second mate chases shadows!"

"He is a dreamer," Oldest said kindly.

"Look!" one of the Folk called.

Rain-Catcher saw a strange sight. Two huge black beasts, twice as tall as the tallest of Those-Who-Have-Gone-Over, climbed up the steep path to the summit of Tall Hill. They moved on four legs that seemed too thin for the muscular bodies perched on top, and some of the joints folded backward. Two long arms with cunning fingers reached and plucked as they walked. Heads stuck out from their bodies on slender necks. The eyes of these beasts were slits. She knew at once these were the ugly ones in Night-Singer's song.

Her second mate came up the path behind the beasts.

The ugly ones and the Folk stared at each other for a long while. Then one of the beasts opened its mouth and made noise.

The sound was so terrible that all those gathered on the hill covered their ears with their hands. The youngling shrieked on her first mate's back. The second beast put a hand on the noisy one's shoulder. It made a beckoning motion to Night-Singer.

Night-Singer stepped forward and sang:

From the sky
They come

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Work to do
Listen
They try to speak.

Rain-Catcher looked at the wise ones and found them tilting their long heads sideways, as puzzled as she. Only spirit came from the sky.

"You must give the meaning of this song, Night-Singer," Far-Strider said. He glanced nervously at the huge beasts as if he feared they would make noise again.

Night-Singer held his hands out, eight fingers splayed, empty of answers.

The second beast stepped forward and the Folk moved out of its way. Rain-Catcher moved too, covering her nose, for the beast stank. Now she saw it carried something small the color of wet stone, but not a hollow stone like she used to catch water. Nor was it made from grass like a basket woven to hold seeds, yet it was shaped like a small one with a lid. She had never seen a basket made of stone that was not stone. She had no word for the thing.

The beast placed the odd thing on the ground and touched it once, twice. The Folk were silent, their round eyes watchful.

A shrill voice came out. Its words were jumbled like grains of sand. "Greetings — Harm not — Builders — Great need — Rock."

A young ternary who had no mate gone over yet fell to the ground, slapping their heads and wailing. Rain-Catcher clutched Den-Builder's arm and found he was trembling.

Night-Singer said, "For three days I sang to this thing. Now it speaks for the Not-Folk. I hold no meaning for this."

The thing began to squawk, a sound like the crying of blind worms when Rain came, then fell silent again.

"You will go to a new home." The thing's voice was now smooth as water. "We have moved your kinfolk already. You are the last, hard to find."

Oldest shook himself as if he had been sleeping. He stood up slowly, letting the folds of loose skin settle over his long bones before he spoke. His eyes were the dark color of the Eye itself, filled with spirit light.

"These words are shadow dreams. Where would the Folk go? Here is home. Our dens are Here."

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The Folk rippled their skins in agreement.

"When a new den is needed, I build it," Den-Builder said.

The thing said, "A better land for dens."

"These three hills give the best land for dens," Far-Strider argued.

"A land where water runs in all seasons, and plants grow taller than folk," the thing added.

Then all the Folk held their hands out, fingers splayed, at such shadow dreaming.

"You cannot stay here," the thing said.

Rain-Catcher had been staring at the one who touched the thing. The gash in its head where a mouth should be moved as the thing talked, yet no sound came out of the beast. And the thing that talked had no mouth. It was very strange.

"Here will not exist much longer," the thing said. "If you stay, you will die."

"Who are you? Why do you threaten the Folk?" Far-Strider demanded.

"We come from — " Now the words tumbled like sand again. "The Eye closes — Sky pebbles not pebbles — We build — "

The thing broke off as if, like Rain-Catcher a moment ago, it could not find the right words. Both beasts stood stiffly on four legs and gestured with two long-fingered hands, cupping them together as if they cradled younglings. Rain-Catcher leaned toward them, trying to pull out meaning. They stopped and pointed at the Eye. Then they repeated the whole display.

Did these beasts mean to pluck the Eye from the sky and hold it in their hands? She tilted her head sideways. Even a youngling knew that was shadow dreaming.

"Circles," the thing squawked. "Rings. A basket."

The beasts pointed again at the Eye. Rain-Catcher squinted at the dark scar without understanding. Some of the Folk laughed, tucking their heads down to their chests out of politeness.

"The Eye in a basket?" Far-Strider said. "You shadow dream!"

Rain-Catcher could not follow the talk of circles or rings, but she knew beasts who could make a talking thing were dangerous. Perhaps Night-Singer was right. They must be more than beasts. He called them Not-Folk.

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Folk and Not-Folk both were silent for a while, watching the Eye's slow closing. The bright pebbles began to glitter in the sky.

The thing said, "We will move you off Here."

"Off?" Far-Strider asked. He made a stern face at the thing. "What does this mean? How can there be 'off'? Shall we jump 'off' Tall Hill?"

Two females laughed, then tucked their heads to their chests.

"Are we insects that we should fly?" Far-Strider said. He glanced round at the Folk, seeking approval for his words.

Rain-Catcher thought he was the shadow dreamer to argue like this with a talking thing. But she knew he had not seen the beast's mouth move when the thing spoke.

Oldest did not laugh. Instead he asked, "Where will you take us?"

In answer, the thing fell to gabbling again and the Folk covered their ears. One of the beasts pointed at the shining pebbles that now filled the sky. No one knew what it meant.

After a moment, words came. "The Eye shuts and never opens again. There will be nothing left of Here. You must hurry or it will be too late for you."

"They speak of other lands in the sky pebbles, and other Eyes to bless them," Night-Singer said. He held his empty hands out. "No meaning."

The Folk blinked at him.

"A very long journey," the thing said.

The Not-Folk picked up the talking thing and started back down the path. Then they stopped and looked back.

"You are the last," the thing said.

When the Not-Folk had gone, Rain-Catcher let out long-held breath. All the Folk sighed and some sat down and held hands. Those-Who-Have-Gone-Over talked together in low voices. Only Oldest held his words to himself.

Night-Singer looked sad as a youngling strayed from its ternary. Rain-Catcher put an arm around his bony shoulder. She liked both her mates, but she liked this one better.

"Come back to the den," she whispered. "Sing to us and we will be happy."

Night-Singer said, "I have brought something bad to the Folk."

"What are we to do?" Den-Builder demanded of Oldest.

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Oldest opened a hand to show he did not hold the answer.

"We will do what Oldest told us before the beasts came," one wise one said. "We will heal the Eye by building the tower."

"The Not-Folk have many things like this one," Night-Singer said. "Some are very big, half as big as a small hill. They do not speak. But some eat land and make it disappear."

"You chase shadows, Night-Singer," Far-Strider said scornfully. "Nothing eats land!"

The Folk looked from one to the other in confusion. Those-Who-Have-Gone-Over never argued with each other.

"Best to build the tower," one male said.

"We must heal the Eye," another agreed.

The old female who was Far-Strider's mate said, "If the beasts touch the Eye — "

Far-Strider interrupted. "No one can touch the Eye! That cannot be what the talking thing meant."

The Folk rippled, agreeing with his words.

"The Eye is displeased," Oldest said. "We must start at once to build the tower. We cannot explain these beasts or their talking thing, but the Eye is our protector and we must please it."

It was hard work. They toiled, finding and carrying rocks as Oldest directed. The tower rose slowly stone by stone on the top of Tall Hill while the fiery pebbles rolled around the sky. The Folk made no complaint, but Rain-Catcher noticed that Far-Strider gazed often at the distance as if he expected the beasts to return.

The tower had not grown half as high as Rain-Catcher and was not as round as even two ternaries could reach when the pebbles began to fade. A different light washed over the sky. The Eye would soon be opening.

No more ternaries came to join the builders. Oldest did not speak of this, nor did any of the Folk mention it. She could not remember a time when anyone had ever disobeyed a summons from Oldest. Perhaps those ternaries had already gone with the Not-Folk. Afraid, she glanced at Oldest, but he said nothing.

"I am hungry," Den-Builder grumbled. "And the youngling is hungry too."

Oldest said, "We will rest now together."

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Rain-Catcher had not had time to gather food for her ternary before they came up Tall Hill, but it was the way of the Three Hills Folk to share. Night-Singer stood aside with the wise ones. Now the Eye sat, half open, on the edge of the distant land.

When they had eaten, Oldest sang the story of the Folk:

In the far time
The long ago time
The time of beauty
The time of the Old Ones
Water flowed over Here
In all seasons
Once grass and reeds
Grew taller than Folk
And beasts were bigger
Some big as Folk
Giving themselves for our food
In the good time
The old time
Now only the Eye remains
And the Folk.

Rain-Catcher had often heard the song about the old time and only partly believed it. How could there have been a better time? Here was beautiful now. Yet she was moved, for Oldest sang the song to bind the Folk to each other and to Here.

The Eye had fully opened by the time Oldest was done. Light flooded the rocks and boulders of the land, and soon it would be hot again. Den-Builder unlaced the sleeping youngling from his back and set it down, then stretched his arms.

Night-Singer broke his long silence.

"I am less than the blind worms in Oldest's path, yet I must speak. The Not-Folk are strong. The big things I have seen do much work. Rain's footsteps boom from the sky when the Eye is open and when the Eye is closed, but no water falls. These things eat Here, and where there were once hills now there are valleys."

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Far-Strider asked, "How does this touch us?"

Night-Singer answered, "If they mean us harm, we are lost."

They all looked to Oldest for his wisdom, Far-Strider also.

"Remember the songs of the Folk," Oldest said in his soft voice. "Always remember the songs."

"A song will not help the Folk against a thing that eats Here," Den-Builder argued. "I believe my den-mate's words. You must give us better counsel."

Oldest said, "The song is all I have left to give."

Rain-Catcher understood in that moment that Oldest meant to die. Who would become Oldest in his turn? She looked at the little group of Those-Who-Have-Gone-Over. Perhaps Far-Strider. It would be bad to lose Oldest's counsel. Oldest had the wisdom of listening, but Far-Strider would go from side to side, a reed blown by the wind.

A strange thought moved through her mind like the wriggling of a blind worm. Did the Not-Folk have spirits? But that could not be, for the Eye gave spirit only to the Folk. Which was worse, Not-Folk with spirit, or Not-Folk with no spirit? She wished Oldest would share his wisdom about such matters, but she feared this time he did not have the answer.

Then Night-Singer sang:

Weave the grass
Make a cage
Catch the insect
Feed a youngling
These Not-Folk
Weave a cage
To catch the Eye
Who can say
What youngling they feed?

In the silence that followed his song, a deep boom shuddered underfoot. The Folk looked fearfully at one another.

"Can it be true," Den-Builder asked, "that these beasts will keep the Eye in a basket, never to open again?"

"How can we live without the Eye?" a female wailed.

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Oldest spread his empty hands.

Something was happening, something vast and terrible that Rain-Catcher did not understand.

After a while, Den-Builder spoke again, "What are we to do?"

"The Folk must be saved from this danger," Far-Strider said. "We must go where the Not-Folk lead."

"The Folk must live." Oldest closed his eyes. "But I will stay Here and build the tower."

At that, Night-Singer turned and walked away, passing the hand Rain-Catcher put out to stop him.

The ternaries beat their heads in dismay. How could the Folk be divided from Oldest and live? It had never happened before.

"Can we trust these beasts?" Den-Builder asked.

Oldest waited until the booming noise died away again. "We hear footsteps that come not from Rain. Can the Folk make such footsteps? No. Yet Night-Singer tells us the Not-Folk can."

"Therefore we must believe they tell the truth," Far-Strider said. "They will lead us to better land."

Rain-Catcher remembered how he had argued there could be no better land than Here and anger filled her.

"This is small hope you offer us," Den-Builder said.

"Better a small shower in a season of drought than none," Far-Strider replied.

"The Folk must stay," one male said.

"The Folk must go," another argued.

Rain-Catcher gazed from one to the other. She could not remember a time when the Folk were so divided.

After a while, two ternaries walked slowly down the hill. There was no talk as they left Oldest, for there were no words to be found for such an action in the long mind of the Folk. Then others followed, silent too, covering their mouths in the sign of grief. Their mates who had gone over made no move to go with them.

"Is it right for Those-Who-Have-Gone-Over to leave Here?" one asked Oldest.

Far-Strider answered in a proud voice, "Surely these crude beasts will need our wisdom to guide them in this better land."

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Now Those-Who-Have-Gone-Over also moved slowly away, covering their mouths. Only Far-Strider strode down the hill, leading his own ternary without looking back.

When all the Folk had gone down the path, Den-Builder put a hand on Rain-Catcher's shoulder. "I grieve, but we must go too."

Her stomach tightened. "This is not the way of the Folk."

"I hold no meaning for this, Rain-Catcher."

She glanced at Oldest. The wise one stood alone at the top of Tall Hill, picking up stones and adding them to the tower. Sensing her gaze, he turned to her and his face was like one who has lost sight of his path.

Night-Singer came back carrying a heavy boulder. When he reached Rain-Catcher, he stopped.

"You must go," he said. "I will stay with Oldest."

"Oldest is dying," Den-Builder argued.

"Here is dying," Night-Singer said. "Go forward. The burden of all life is always to go forward."

"Why not you too?" she asked.

He leaned across the boulder and laid his face against hers, warm stone between them, the youngling asleep at their feet.

"I honor the Eye even as the days of the Eye are ending," Night-Singer said. "I see much sorrow in this. Yet the Folk must endure."

But change walked the land, Rain-Catcher thought. The old ways had been broken and did not serve them now.

Then Night-Singer sang to his mates:

I cannot heal the Eye's wound
Nor unbuild the cage
But I will sing
That once the Eye was free
And Here existed
For as long as I breathe.

The land shook under her feet until she thought she would fall. Still she could not bring herself to go.

Night-Singer moved away from her, carrying his rock to the unfinished tower.

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"Come, be quick," Den-Builder said, clutching her arm. "We must do this for the youngling."

She felt bitten in two. The youngling woke and began to wail. Den-Builder lifted it as Here trembled.

"Rain-Catcher! We will die if we stay."

The first stones shook loose from the rising tower. Oldest stooped and picked them up. More tumbled when he reached to replace the first. Night-Singer too caught falling stones and put them back.

She knew it was useless. The tower could not stand. The Eye would close and not open again, and they could not stop it. The tallest tower had no strength against these beasts.

She gazed at the infant. It grew plump already, and its eyes were beginning to take on color. In time, it would be as beautiful as Night-Singer. Perhaps the Eye would have chosen it to go over, but the Eye would not live long enough even to give it spirit. She took the youngling from Den-Builder's arms.

There were shadows on the land now, stretching all the way to Small Hill and beyond. Below Tall Hill, one of the Not-Folk waited, beckoning them to hurry. Behind the beast she saw a thing bigger than the tower Oldest had tried to build. The thing flashed in the light like water.

Small Hill suddenly leaped into the air, then poured down in a torrent of rocks. The land shook so hard Rain-Catcher almost lost hold of the youngling. Where the smallest of the three hills had once been, now there was level land. A vast cloud of dust moved across the new plain. The youngling thrashed in her arms. Trembling with fright, she waited to see what would happen next. The dust streamed away.

Perhaps her first mate was right and the beasts intended no harm, but she saw they intended no good either, and that was more dangerous. She turned her back to the shining thing that waited.

"Where are you going? The path is this way," Den-Builder said. His face seemed folded inward with fear. "The Folk must live. Oldest has commanded it."

Oldest had no more counsel to give. Night-Singer too had lost the way. All around her, rocks she knew as well as her own skin began to glow as if on fire and a new, bitter smell drifted up to her nose.

She stood at the edge where Tall Hill dropped sharply into a ravine and

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lifted the youngling above her head. The sky pebbles had blessed it, yet without Here's Eye it would never have spirit. Folk without spirit were feared, for they did great harm. She glanced down. The boulders in the ravine below were sharp enough to kill. She opened her mouth and grief flowed out.

"Rain-Catcher!" her first mate called in alarm.

A loud sound, and a crack opened almost where she stood, running backward from the ravine like the wet season flow of water reversed and rolling uphill. Rocks and boulders from both sides tumbled into it. A great cloud of gray dust rose from the pit, clogging Rain-Catcher's nose and making her cough.

The Not-Folk were big and powerful, and she was small and weak. There was no one strong enough to save the Folk. Then sorrow turned to stone in her mouth and anger filled her heart.

The youngling wailed and Rain-Catcher cradled it against her breast. The old ways were gone. She — not Those-Who-Have-Gone-Over — must find a new way to live, a new song of binding, for the old ways and the old songs held no more power.

Something roiled within her as if she had eaten sharp stones, a feeling she had never known before, more bitter than anger, a hard purpose that gave her strength. Behind her, she heard a shout as Oldest's tower crashed down and she felt Tall Hill shiver.

Rain-Catcher began to sing her first song, her voice hesitant, then clearing, gathering strength:

Not blessed by the Eye
How can Not-Folk have spirit?
The Folk cannot stay Here
So great is the harm
This youngling too
Is empty inside
But will not forget
The Folk driven from Here
Not-Folk and youngling
Who can say which shall do
The other greater harm?

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The new awareness hurt, but like small rain in dry times it was better than none. Cradling the infant, she walked toward the shining thing that waited for her.

She would not look at the caged Eye again.

"Let's call it a night — things will look different in the morning."

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Jack Cady has lived all over the United States, but for the past couple of decades, his home turf has been the Pacific Northwest. His most recent novels include Inagehi *and* The Off Season *and he's working on a new one set along the Hood Canal. Last year, he turned his hand to nonfiction with an informal overview of American storytelling,* The American Writer, *in which he traced (among many other things) the impact on American literature of the concepts of Original Sin and Original Good.*

Mr. Cady says this new story arose from his consideration of what happened to the idealistic flower-power generation of the 1960s as they grew older, but it's clear that there are age-old themes at work in this tale.

Jeremiah

By Jack Cady

AT THE MEETING OF TWO secondary roads, Hell-Fer-Certain Church stands like faded rag-tags left over from a cosmic yard sale. This once quiet country church, with a single bell in the steeple, has virginal white paint decorated with psychedelic shades of pink and orange and green; those colors mixing with hard yellows and blues positive as bullhorns. For a short time in the past this abandoned church was used by a commune.

In the tower beside the cracked bell dangles a loudspeaker that once broadcast rock music, or called faithful flower-folk to seek renunciation of a world too weird for young imaginings. Then the speaker died, insulation burned away, the whole business one gigantic short circuit as sea wind wailed across the wires.

And the vivid paint, itself, faded before the wind and eternal rain that washes this northwest Washington coast. Those of us who once congregated at the church have dispersed, some to cemeteries to doze among worms, some to boardrooms of corporations. And some, of course, have

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stayed in the neighborhood, too inept, or stoned, or unimaginative to leave; although in dark and mist-ridden hours we sometimes recall young dreams.

Then, lately, the church added one more perturbed voice to its long history. A new preacher drifted here from dingy urban streets. In the uncut grass of the front yard a reader-board began carrying messages. It advised passersby to atone, although around here folks show little in the way of serious transgression. They cheat at cards, sometimes, or drive drunk, or sleep with their neighbors' wives or husbands; and most shoot deer out of season. On the grand scale of things worth atoning, they don't have much to offer.

But the reader-board insisted that, without atonement, the wages of sin are one-way tickets to a medieval hell, ghastly, complete, and decorated with every anguish imagined by demonic zeal; seas of endless fire, the howl of demons, sacramental violence in the hands of an angry God.

And fire, we find — be it sacramental or not — has become part of our story.

On Sundays the new preacher stood in the doorway. Jeremiah is as faded as the faded paint on his church. His black suit and string tie are frayed, his white shirts are the only white shirts left in the county, and his sod-busting shoe-tops are barely brushed by frayed cuffs of pants a bit too short, having been "taken up" a time or two. He needed no loudspeaker or bullhorn as he stood preaching in the wind. When it comes to messages like "Woe Betide," Jeremiah had the appearance, vision, and voice of an old-time prophet predicting celestial flames and wails of lost souls — no amplification needed.

There are, in this valley, some who view Jeremiah and sneer. A few others value Sunday morning services. Many are too busy or drunk to care. Some are outright displeased. Rather than tell all opinions about Jeremiah, or lack of them, a cross-section of comments by some of the valley's main players seems appropriate:

Mac, skinny, balding, and fiftyish, runs Mac's Bar and was first to see Jeremiah arrive: "As long as he stays on his side of the road I treasure the jerk. There's a certain amusement factor."

Debbie, who is an artist, a barfly, a fading beauty, and thoughtful:

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"I've tried a lot of this-and-that in my time, but I never molested a preacher. Have I been missing something?"

Pop, gray and wiry and always sober, is a small-time pool and poker hustler: "Seems like he works purty hard for blamed little in the collection plate."

Sarah's religious beliefs, like her tie-dyed clothes, have followed currents of popular style. Through the years she has embraced Hari Krishna, the Pope, Buddha, Siddhartha, Mohammed, and Karl Jung, while mostly wearing Mother Hubbard styles. "It's the Lord's blessing has sent Jeremiah to us. Praise the Lord. Praise him!"

Not many people live here anymore. One of the secondary roads that meet at the church corner leads up from the sea. At the harbor are abandoned docks and fishing sheds where ghosts drift through fog-ridden afternoons. The buildings are huge, like a town abandoned by giants. Ghosts glide through mist, whisper like voices of mist, fade into mist when approached. We've gotten used to them. The ghosts threaten no one, except they seem so sad, the sadness of ghosts.

The other road leads through a flat valley where empty farmhouses lean into sea winds that rumble from the western coast. The houses are ramshackle. Shakes on roofs have blown away, and broken windows welcome the scouring wind. They are, themselves, ghosts; ghost houses that daily remind us of mournful matters; symbols of abandonment and failed plans.

What was once a valley of small dairy farms has been purchased farm-by-farm, and built into one huge corporation farm worked by only a few men. Our farms once had names: River View, Heather Hill, and a dozen others.

Now, cattle are bred, no longer for milk, but as blocks of meat. The valley has become a source of supply for a hamburger kingdom, a franchise that ships product to fast food joints in Seattle, Yokohama, and maybe, even, Beirut. The cattle, well adapted to wind that roughs their heavy coats, grow thick on hormones and valley grass. Then they are trucked to slaughter.

Across the road from Hell-Fer-Certain stands an old post office little larger than a postage stamp. Weathered benches in front of the post office

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serve loafers, or people waiting for a bus to Seattle. A country store stands next to the post office. Mac's Bar stands next to the store. If you visit the bar on a Saturday or Sunday night you'll swear this valley holds every old pickup truck in the world. People congregate at the bar to forget they are survivors of a failed place. No one farms anymore. No one fishes.

One important thing happens on Sunday night, and it draws the Sunday crowd. Cattle get restless as headlights and marker lights of trucks appear on two-lane macadam. The trucks, twenty or more, arrive in groups of two or three. They pull possum-belly trailers built like double-deckers so as to haul more beef. The truckers will not load live cattle until Monday morning, but by Sunday night the cattle already know something stinks. The beasts become uneasy. The cattle, bred for meat and not for brains, still have survival instincts. The herds cluster together, each beast jostling toward the middle of the herd where there is an illusion of safety. Bawling carries on the winds. The entire valley fills with sounds of terror.

Folks swear it's Jeremiah's preaching riles the cattle, but we know it isn't so. As trucks roll in, Sunday nights turn into Jeremiah's busy time. He stands before Hell-Fer-Certain and preaches above the wind. His string tie flutters like a banner, and his white and uncut hair is whirled by wind that carries the bawling of bovine fear.

With no place to go, and a twelve-hour layover, truck drivers drift to the bar and buy rounds. They're good enough lads, but they have steady employment and that gets resented. They generally come through the doorway of Mac's bent like fishhooks beneath the flood of prophecy coming from across the road. Jeremiah puts the fear of God in them. Plus, truck-driving builds a mighty thirst in a man. It's that combination causes them to stand so many drinks.

This, then, is the place we live. It is not the best place, not the worst, but it's ours; a small and slightly drunken spot on the Lord's green earth. It was never, until Jeremiah and Mac got into it, a place where anything titanic seemed likely. Then Jeremiah confounded Mac's hopes. He crossed the road.

It began on one of those rare August afternoons when mist blows away, sun covers the valley grass, and hides of cattle turn glossy with light.

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The macadam road dries from wet black to luminous gray. A few early drinkers stay away from Mac's, vowing not to get fuzzy until the return of ugly weather.

Mac busied himself stocking beer cases behind his polished oak bar. Polished mirrors behind the bar reflected a clutter of chairs and tables around a small dance floor. The mirrors pictured colorful beer signs, brushed pool tables, dart boards, and restroom doors that in early afternoons stand open to air out the stench of disinfectant. Either a reflection in the mirrors, or a silhouette in the sun-brightened doorway caused Mac to look up.

"Praise the Lord," said the silhouette. Then Jeremiah moved out of sunlight and into the shadow of the bar.

"All I needed," Mac said as if talking to himself, "was...," and he squinted at Jeremiah, "this," and he squinted harder. Mac's balding dome shone like a small light in the shadowed bar. Although he's thin, he's muscular. At the time most of the working muscles were in his jaw. "You're a bad dream," Mac told Jeremiah. "You're the butt end of a bad joke. You're turnip pie. You're first cousin to a used-car salesman, and what's worse, you're in my bar."

Jeremiah looked around the joint, which stood empty except for Debbie, the artist-barfly. Debbie looked Jeremiah over with her blue and smiling eyes, brushed long hair back with one hand, and gave a practiced and seductive smile that went nowhere; although it would have worked on a truck driver.

"A customer is a customer," Jeremiah said, and he did not sound particularly righteous. "And it appears that you could use one." He stepped to the bar like a man with experience. "Soft drink," he said. "Water chaser." Seen beneath bar-light, Jeremiah turned from a cartoon preacher into a real person. His face looked older than his body. His hair, not silver but white, hung beside wrinkled cheeks, pouchy eyelids, and a mouth that sagged a little on the right side; a mouth that had preached too many adjectives, or else the mouth of a man who had suffered a slight stroke. He looked at Debbie. "A woman as well found as yourself could make a success if she cleaned up her act." Jeremiah commandeered a barstool, pushed a dollar onto the bar, and sat.

"You want something," Mac told him. "What?"

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"We'll get to it," Jeremiah said, "and for your own good I will shortly get to you." He slowly turned to look over the bar. "It will be a quiet afternoon." Beyond the windows a beat-up pickup pulled away from the post office. Across the road Hell-Fer-Certain Church stood in faded psychedelic colors.

"I believe in evolution," Debbie said, her interest suddenly piqued.

"Who doesn't," Jeremiah told her, "except that it didn't produce humans. It only produced Charles Darwin. You may wish to think about that."

Debbie, thoroughly confused, now found herself thoroughly fascinated. She tried to think.

Mac, on the other hand, was not confused. After all, Mac is a bartender. "You talk like a man who is sane," he told Jeremiah, "so what's your hustle?" Mac looked through the front windows at the church. He seemed to be remembering the loud prophecy, the dogmatic hollering, the Sunday nights of wind and truck engines and sermons. "You don't talk the way you should." Mac's voice sounded lame.

"It's a problem preachers have," Jeremiah told him. "The words we use are old, time-worn, water-smooth, and even, sometimes, decapitated. Our traditions are ancient, as are the symbols; crosses and lambs and towers of wrath. Plus, in today's world the volume on everything has been cranked higher. Would you pay attention to a quietly delivered message?"

Mac hesitated, wiped the counter with a bar rag, and seemed to remember younger days, days when people actually thought that they were thinking. "You just busted your own argument," Mac said. "I never paid attention before, but I'm hearing you now."

"In that case," Jeremiah told him, "we may proceed with your salvation, and possibly my own." His voice sounded firm, advisory, nearly scolding.

Medieval hells of fire and brimstone, according to Jeremiah, were problematic ("I honor the tradition.") but Hell, itself, was certain, either in this world or the next. "All versions of hell get boring, because even anguish wears out sooner or later. I care nothing for it."

Debbie looked at her small glass of chablis, pushed it two or three inches away from her, and sat more sad than confused. Debbie is not a bad artist, and she might have been great. These days she paints cute pictures for sale to tourists. Things happen. Life happens.

"Don't get me started talkin'." Mac's tone of voice said the opposite

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of his words. Mac used to be a thinker, but few abstractions ever make it to a bar. Bartending causes rust on the brain.

"Which is why my main interest is atonement, thus redemption." Jeremiah sipped at his soft drink, looked at the label on the can, and gave an honest but crooked grin from his sagging mouth. "This stuff is not exactly sacramental."

"It's such a pretty day," Debbie said, "it's such a pretty day." She retrieved her small purse from the bar, walked to the doorway, and stood framed in sunlight. Then she stepped into sunlight. She walked away, not briskly, but like one enchanted by a stroll in the sun.

"Handsome woman," said Jeremiah.

"Lost customer," said Mac.

"We'll speak again, and soon," Jeremiah promised. "Between then and now you may wish to ponder a question. How many differences, if any, are there between a preacher and a bartender?" He stood, gave a backward wave as he walked to the doorway, and stepped into sunlight. His shabby suit and clod-hopper shoes made him look like a distinguished bum, or an itinerant living on the bare edge of respectability.

THE FABULOUS weather did not last. Mist rolled in from the coast. It was followed by rain. Hides of cattle turned glossy, and rain puddled in the churchyard of Hell-Fer-Certain. On next Sunday night, as trucks rolled in, Jeremiah performed like a champion, but with a different message. Anyone who paid the least attention understood that new images entered his calls for atonement. Instead of talking about lambs, he spoke of cattle. When speaking of heaven he no longer pictured streets of gold, but streets of opportunity. The image of the cross gave way to an image of the morning star. Hardly anyone gave two snips about images, but later on we would figure Jeremiah made changes in order to get Mac's attention.

And through the week, and through the next, it was Mac who changed the most, because (though no one knew it at the time) Mac tried to answer Jeremiah's question.

A good bartender is a precious sight, and Mac was always good. His instincts were quick, accurate, nearly cat-like. He knew when to be

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smart-mouthed, when to be glib, and when to be thoughtful. He never lost control of the bar, but now he went beyond control and even directed entertainment.

If bar talk slowed, or the pool tables stood empty, Mac resembled a school teacher introducing new subjects. Instead of baseball, used truck parts, and cattle, we found ourselves cussing and discussing local Indian legends. We talked about the fall of empires, Roman and American. We quibbled over histories of Franklin Roosevelt and Henry Ford. In only two little weeks Mac's Bar turned into an interesting place to congregate, and not simply a place to get stewed.

Conversation improved but beer-drinking slowed. Mac ran a highly enhanced bar, but made less money. For those who know him well, Mac seemed slightly confused but almost happy. Since no one around here has been really happy for a long, long time, we were confused as well.

Meanwhile, gray day followed gray day and life went on as usual. On the coast, mist cloaked the broken wharves, warehouses, and abandoned fish cannery. Ghosts whispered through mist, nearly indistinguishable from mist; we thought them ghosts of fishermen lost at sea, ghosts of fishing boats long drowned. Thus, from the coast to the fields, memories of work and order and dreams lay as sprawled as wreckage.

Those ghosts of the land, the abandoned houses, leaned before wind and seemed ready not to shriek, but groan. Cattle lined the fences beside the road. As they appeared through mist, the cattle looked ghostly; silvered black hides, pale white faces, bovine stares toward us, and toward the road that would shortly carry them to slaughter.

Then, on a Saturday afternoon when baseball should have been the topic, Mac looked across the bar, across to Hell-Fer-Certain, and said "What does he mean by atonement?"

"It's being sorry for screw-ups." Pop, our local hustler, leaned against the end of the bar nearest the pool tables. As afternoon progressed, and as beer built confidence among customers, one or another booze-hound would challenge Pop to dollar-a-game. Pop would clean the guy's clock, and his wallet. For the moment, though, Pop was free to talk. He is a short, graying man, usually taciturn.

"It's more than that," Debbie said. "I can feel sorry for screw-ups any old time I want." She sipped at her wine. Her eyes squinched a little, and

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sorrow entered her voice. "Come to think of it, I usually want. Sorry most days...." She realized she was saying too much. She saw her reflection in the bar mirror, smoothed her hair with one hand, smoothed wrinkles on the sleeve of her blouse with the other.

"It's recognizing that you're out of sync with the universe." Sarah, granny skirts and all, attends Mac's Bar on Saturday afternoons. She would be happier in a sewing circle or a book discussion group, but she doesn't own a sewing machine and we don't have a library.

"Ninety days for drunk-and-disorderly. That's atonement." Pop looked down the bar where sat at least three customers who knew all about doing ninety days. "I rest my case."

"That's only punishment," Debbie whispered. Almost no one heard her.

Jeremiah next appeared at ten A.M. on a rainy Monday. Truck engines roared as truckers slowed for the intersection of roads, then caught a gear and started building revs. The possum-belly trailers were crowded with living beef standing silent as ghosts, the animals packed together and intimidated; the trucks rolling purgatories for beasts.

Mac and Sarah and Debbie opened the bar. Or rather, Mac opened the bar while Sarah made morning coffee and Debbie loafed. Mac brushed pool tables and cleaned rest rooms. Sarah drank coffee and watched the road. Sarah, who is nobody's mother, looks like she would do for the sainted mother of us all. Her face is sweet, her hair hangs in long braids, her figure is slightly dumpy. Her hands are workworn because she lives by cleaning houses of corporation people. If Sarah has a problem, and Sarah does, it's because she's a sucker for any new trend. She keeps ideas the way other people keep goldfish. Like goldfish, the ideas swim in all directions.

When Jeremiah entered the bar, rain glistened on his black suit and dripped from ends of his white hair. Wrinkles in his face looked like channels for rain. He sniffed the morning smells of the bar, stale tobacco, the stench of disinfectant. The smell of fresh coffee seemed to draw Jeremiah. He sat beside Sarah who was, at least for the moment, one of his parishioners.

"Praise the Lord," said Sarah.

"You got that right." Jeremiah gave a couple of sniffs and asked for

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coffee. He hunched above his coffee cup. His black suit made him look like a raven regarding road-kill. "Although," he said to Sarah, "if we must unceasingly praise the Lord, does that mean the Lord has an inferiority complex? If the Lord needs constant praise we may be dealing with a major case of insecurity."

Mac used a narrow broom to sweep between bar and barstools. Jeremiah's question stopped him. He shook his head. "I got to wonder whose side you're on?"

"I like you more positive." Sarah's voice did not tremble, but she seemed alarmed. "The Lord is supposed to let people feel safe, and stuff...like, no mystery stuff."

"Thank God for mysteries." Jeremiah's voice sounded nebulous as mist, although his words did not. "Life without mystery would be life without dreams. The universe would be dull indeed." Outside, at the intersection of roads, a truck engine roared as its driver revved, then caught a higher gear.

"For instance," and Jeremiah looked at Mac, not Sarah or Debbie, "do cattle dream? Does a young heifer or steer muse beyond that next mouthful of grass? Are there great cattle-questions? Better yet, are there herd dreams? Does the herd graze according to music tuned only to bovine ears?" Jeremiah's voice seemed not exactly sad, but he certainly was not joking.

"And do ghosts dream?" Jeremiah looked into mist, at the road that leads down to the sea. "A ghost may actually be a dream. After someone dies, maybe a leftover dream stands up and walks."

"Quit scaring me," Sarah whispered. She raised work-worn hands to cover her ears.

"I hope to scare you, because faith may not be as productive as doubt. Doubt asks questions and faith does not." Jeremiah's voice was not kind. He paused. "Is there some dread realm where human dreams and the dreams of cattle are appreciably the same?" He looked across the road at Hell-Fer-Certain. "If so, what does that say about all of us?"

At the time Sarah didn't get it, and Mac didn't either. Knowing Mac, though, it was a lead-pipe cinch he'd catch on sooner or later. He leaned against the bar. "Bartenders and preachers have a lot going," he told Jeremiah. "Both have something to sell, both exercise control over others,

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both serve as handy ears for the confessions of sinners." Mac grinned like a naughty three-year-old. "Both flip a certain amount of bull, and what they sell wears off after a good night's sleep."

"I'd fault your logic if it was worth my time." Jeremiah pushed his coffee away. "Also, I asked about difference, not similarity."

"My mistake." Mac sounded like a ten-year-old kid caught stealing nickels.

"Meanwhile, suppose a ghost really is a leftover dream?" Jeremiah stood, stretched, looked through the windows at mist and rain. Then he looked at Mac with distaste, like a man regarding a favorite nephew arrested on a burglary rap. "You can think more clearly than you have."

"You know it," Mac said, "and I know it."

"When I was young," Jeremiah told him, "I wanted to change the world...wanted to make things better...figured to find a cure for common hatreds, ignorance, wanted to defeat war...prejudice...." He seemed as puzzled as Mac. He looked across the road at the fading colors of Hell-Fer-Certain. When he left the bar he walked slower than usual.

Atonement became the name of our game. Redemption became more than a word in a sermon. Our problem came because we didn't know what needed atoning. If anybody needed redemption it couldn't happen until we figured out our original foul-up.

But anyone with brains could see that Jeremiah made a bold if harsh play for the heart and soul of one man, Mac. Jeremiah seemed old as king Solomon, at least in experience, and maybe as wise. Being old, he knew he had little time left. What he'd said about wanting to change the world told us he wasn't fooling when he talked about dreams. We supposed if he couldn't change the world, he figured to change one man.

And, if Mac made less money, our local hustler, Pop, made more. As the bar became a place for interesting topics, guys stayed sober longer. Pop enjoyed a surge of prosperity because a good hustle depends on the full attention of the guy being hustled. Sober guys have longer attention spans. It was during a lull in sober conversation that an awful thing happened.

On a fog-bound afternoon when headlights on the road appeared as silver discs, and as fog muffled the sound of engines, Mac absent-mindedly drew a beer. He set it before a customer, and muttered to himself, "He's

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trying to figure out what happens when dreams fizzle...the death of dreams...."

Only Pop and Debbie heard. Debbie touched her wine glass, gave a dry little sob, and sat silent. Pop looked at Debbie, then at Mac. "You'd better not lay that one on the table," he whispered. "It will empty out the joint."

Mac emptied the bar, anyway. During the next hour he grew completely silent, then surly. If he was angry at himself and taking it out on customers, or his bar, or the universe, or on Jeremiah, no one could say. All we knew was that Mac was not jolly. As afternoon misted toward evening, customers stepped through the doorway into mist. By happy hour only Pop and Debbie remained. Bar neon glowed through mist like a token of sorrow, or like the subdued symbol of a small and unimportant corner of Hell.

"Everybody had big plans at one time or other." Pop murmured this, more to himself than to Debbie or Mac. "Time was when I didn't make a living with a pool cue." He looked at Mac in a kindly way, a way no one expects to see in a pool hustler. "We're gettin' old," Pop told Mac. "I guess we expected more...." He looked around the bar, at twirly beer lights and the green felt of pool tables. "...didn't expect more of the world, maybe. Expected more of ourselves."

"I'm headed home," Debbie whispered. "Art is not an illusion. I used to know that." She shrugged into her jacket and looked at the men. "Pay no attention. I don't understand it, either."

FIRE STRUCK our land during early morning hours. It drank deeply of wind, flared and flamed through mist like a maddened imp squalling in the middle of fields. It blasted the farmhouse of Indian Hill Farm.

Indian Hill's house stood ramshackle and wrecked a thousand yards from the road. As the first touch of dawn moved grayly above fields, fire towered and blew sideways, tongues of flame lapping at mist. Mist blew into the flames, mixed with flames, and steam exhaled from the very mouth of fire. Wind carried the fire, and fire flamed ascendent above wet fields. By full dawn, Indian Hill farmhouse lay as embers beneath a steady morning rain.

That first fire saddened us. Bar talk remembered people who once

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owned Indian Hill, their sons, daughters, cousins; even the name of their collie-shepherd mix, once known as the best cattle-herding dog in the valley. Bar talk remembered August days of cutting or baling hay, or of trucks pulling silver-colored tank trailers, making milk pick-ups at each valley farm. A drunk wrote "I miss you so goodam much," on the wall of the men's can, but Mac painted it over right away.

The cattle corporation uses the old barns to store equipment, even though the farmhouses are abandoned. The corporation brought in a bulldozer, cleaned up the burn site, and seeded it with grass. The bulldozer knocked down outbuildings. The old barn stood solitary in the middle of fields. It seemed a testament to memories.

The second fire took the house of Valley View Farm which stood behind a stubby lane, and up a little rise. That house had become a fearful thing. Because of the short lane, and the rise, the house brooded above the road like a specter. It was larger than most farmhouses, and two fanlights had once looked toward the road like colorful eyes. With abandonment the glass had been broken. The eyes stared toward the road, hollow as eyes of the blind.

This second fire was hard for us to talk away, think away, or drink away. It continued to flame in the minds of those who saw it (and most everyone did) long after rain washed ashes down the rise. The fire began just after nightfall on a Tuesday when the valley stood empty of tractor-trailers, of truckers, and reduced by some few hundred cattle. As fire towered above the road, pickups pulled to the side, parked, and people talked or stared. Mist once more blew into flames, turned to steam, and steam blew across the road and into our faces. The stench of burning carried in the mist, but something worse walked to us.

Cattle were in the fields. Against all nature, the cattle drifted toward the fire. The herd formed a semicircle in the wind-blown mist. White faces of cattle stared through mist, were reddened by reflections from the fire. The cattle stared not at fire, but stared in ghostly illumination at the road where we stood helpless to affect events, and watched; where we spoke excitedly, or with sadness, or with but a murmur. The cattle seemed to stand as witness to our lives, their eyes blank as the blind eyes of the dying house.

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The corporation bulldozed, seeded, and called the sheriff. One fire might be accidental. Two fires spelled arson. The sheriff went through motions, but couldn't see the point. After all, the houses were worthless.

"It's a trick question," Mac confided to Debbie on one of those afternoons when wind drops and fog gathers thick enough to hinder traffic. Across the road Hell-Fer-Certain stood in the fog like a ghost. "The difference between a bartender and a preacher is no difference at all."

"Because?"

"Because jobs have nothing to do with the basic guy." Mac looked around his bar like he saw it for the first time. "That preacher is not a beat-up church, and this bartender is not a bar. You got it?"

"If you came to that smart an answer," Debbie told him, "then it wasn't a trick question."

If Mac had changed, and if Jeremiah was using different images, Debbie changed as well. Although she told no one, images of fire occupied her, as did sadness. "There's a word called 'expiation,'" she said in a low voice. "I think we'll learn about it."

The third fire took Heather Hill Farm, and the fourth took River View. By then August was long past, September waning, as fall rains began in earnest. The valley filled with flame and steam. Cattle now grazed nearer the road, stood looking across fences in that dumb, animal manner that seems asking for explanation.

Then, on a night when the sky seemed to seep absolute darkness, as well as seeping rain, Debbie trudged toward the bar. Throughout the valley, as fires continued, sadness had become not only ordinary but a custom. We did not understand that it was not simply a few old houses being burned away. Symbolically, flame engulfed our history. People headed to the bar where night could not be defeated, but could be allayed. Neon signs colored our night world. Cone-lights above pool tables suggested focus and illumination. As Debbie passed the reader-board in front of Hell-Fer-Certain she sensed movement in the darkness. She gave a small, involuntary gasp.

"It's only me." Mac's voice sounded controlled, but fearful. "Pop is running the joint for an hour or two."

"You're standing in rain before a church that drives you nuts. Plus you've

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been acting spooky. Are you the arsonist?" Debbie hesitated, thought about fires and Mac's whereabouts. "You couldn't be unless you're setting them with a timer. You were behind the bar for two fires out of four."

Mac made a vague motion toward the church. "He is," Mac said.

"For the love of God." Jeremiah's voice came from darkness before the church. "For other loves as well."

"You're helping him?" Debbie asked Mac. She felt for a moment that she should flee. "What are you doing out here if you're not helping him?"

"Because I thought I liked the guy. Because I'm sicka selling beer. Because it isn't raining inside...how the hell do I know...." Mac's voice turned apologetic. "...sorry.... I'm not sure why I'm here, but I am sure that hell is about to start popping. Look west."

Debbie turned. "You guys are scaring me. You are." In the west, like beginning sunset, a slight glow of orange showed at docks and cannery. "Mass fire, massive," Debbie whispered to herself. "If any of that goes, all of it goes."

"No water down there except what's in the ocean." Mac turned to where Jeremiah stood in darkness. "I reckon this is supposed to mean something?"

"I reckon it does." Jeremiah's voice did not sound preacherly, but grim. "Or maybe it's just a reckoning."

"Why are you doing this?" Debbie sensed Jeremiah's presence but could not find him in the darkness. Rain patted on her hooded parka. It puddled at her feet. "Everybody was getting by," she said. "Things aren't great but we were making it." She watched as the orange glow increased. "I won't cop on you," she whispered to Jeremiah, "or at least I guess I won't. But, you'd do well to have an explanation." She turned to Mac. "Everybody will be going down there pretty quick. Drive me."

Mac stood quiet, a man afraid, or maybe only indecisive. Debbie took his arm. She turned toward the darkness before the church. "Go ahead and tell me this is the will of the Lord," Debbie said to Jeremiah. "Then I'll know you're nuts." She walked toward Mac's pickup.

"Redemption by fire." Jeremiah's harsh whisper came from shadows before the church. "I don't think the Lord has much to do with it. You're an artist. Figure it out."

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Immense fires, fires as big as cities burning, cast heat so huge they must warm the toes of heaven. Lesser fires, like the burning of a way of life, are localized, thus more spectacular.

By the time Mac and Debbie arrived, fire already covered docks and rose into the night through the roofs of warehouses. Sounds of burning, the crash of timbers, the roar of volcanic updrafts silenced the sounds of seawind and surf. Fire moved toward the enormous cannery as heat melted asphalt on the road between warehouses. When the road began to burn, a stench of petroleum mixed with dry smells of woodsmoke from flaming walls and floors; this while rain wept and blew across the scene, sizzled, pattered through mist.

Mac and Debbie stood halfway down a hill leading to the cannery. Heat coasted up the side of the hill and stopped their advance. Behind them, cresting the hill, headlights of old pickups pointed toward the fire as people arrived, the beams of light swallowed by fire. Firelight rose toward the scud of low-flying clouds, and black smoke crisscrossed through the light as heat mixed and churned the winds. As more and more people arrived headlights were switched off. People milled, clustered together, sought an illusion of unity, of safety. Fire swept into the broken doors of the cannery. Fire illuminated faces in the crowd. Firelight glowed orange on cheeks and hands. It glossed clothing with a sheen of red. Fire caused shadows, made eyes seem like hollows of night.

"Is this expiation?" Debbie whispered beneath the roar of fire. She watched as flame burst through the high roof of the cannery. Then, because it seemed nothing so awful could be a focus for good, she looked away, then gasped. She tried to turn, tried to look back up the hill, or at the wet and weeping heavens, or anywhere except where her gaze finally was forced to focus.

On the periphery of the fire vague movement began in blowing mist. At first the movement seemed only swirls of mist, then shapes began to coalesce. Shapes drifted like unimportant murmurs. Mist blew among them, seemed to offer substance, and the shapes became human figures drifting toward fire, unhesitating, herd-like and passive; not, after all, only the ghosts of fishermen drowned, but the ghosts of dreams summoned to the burning; dreams that like threatened beasts gave final screams, then fell into mute acceptance.

...and Debbie saw a young Mac bouncing a basketball while coaching

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kids, and a young Jeremiah standing before a mission school. Mostly, though, she saw a young woman sitting before canvas, saw the turn of a young wrist properly pointing a brush, sensing the depth of colors in the palette, saw a young woman alive with the high dreams of art; then watched the diminishing form of that young and lovely woman, a woman aspiring to creation, drift slowly, inexorably, to disappear into the roar of flames.

"I think," said Mac in a voice too husky to come from anything but tears, "that it's time to get the hell out."

"And I think," said Debbie, "that your expression is apt. But I'm not sure I like you anymore. Go back without me. I'll catch a ride." She managed to control her voice.

CLIMAX AND anticlimax. Fire swept across the scene in fountains and waves. When the cannery roof fell, machinery glowed red. Water pipes and steam pipes twisted, boilers stood like the crimson cauldrons of medieval hell, and people gradually stopped exclaiming, because nothing, it seems, can be remarkable forever. People climbed in their trucks, turned around, and told themselves and each other that what they really needed was a drink. The show was over, the festivities ended, a way of life had passed and no one even knew it.

Debbie, riding four-to-a-cab in a rickety pickup, looked beyond headlights and into mist. She felt slugged in the stomach. A glow stood in the sky.

To those who arrived from the destruction of the cannery, Hell-Fer-Certain Church burned as an afterthought. Flame lighted the inside of the church, and stained glass windows pictured scenes from Bible stories. Stained glass gradually fell away as heat melted lead, turned glass to powder when fire burst through to rise along the outside of the building. Psychedelic colors of pink and orange and green twisted beneath flame, turned brown, turned gray, and fell to ash. Fire roared to the top of the steeple where wind caused it to wave as a hellish flag. When the cracked bell and the broken loudspeaker fell from the steeple, only Debbie gave it more than passing thought.

As emotionally exhausted people drifted toward the bar, Debbie found she did not want a drink, did not want company, but did want to

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wring an explanation out of Jeremiah. And Jeremiah, it turned out, was not to be found.

Debbie looked toward Mac's bar, saw the glow of barlight, heard the loud voices of people with little information and large opinions. She turned back to the church and watched the last flames die to yellow flickers above coals. The flames licked feebly at mist, and Debbie became conscious that in the fields beyond Hell-Fer-Certain, herds lined the fences; cattle, white-faced, ghostly in the illumination from dying flames, and mute.

We woke, next day, bewildered. Dullness spread across the valley. It invaded our lives, or rather, seeped into our lives. We lived in a place where dreams had died, a world of rain and cattle and embers. It was a world stripped of sense, stripped even of ghosts, and we began to understand that hell need not be spectacular, only dull. At least that seemed true.

Debbie watched, wept, thought, and recorded in her journal this history of our destroyed world. With the eyes of an artist she watched herself in mirrors, saw drawn features, the high and accented cheekbones of age, the ravages, not of time, but of loss; and she despised Jeremiah. She listened as hatred flared among us, hot hatred because people wanted someone to blame. As guesses turned to rumor, then to conviction, it became obvious that it was Jeremiah who dealt in flame. People cursed his name. Men sought for him throughout the valley, and swore vengeance.

Our destroyed world, what had it been? Abandoned farms, abandoned fishery, and dregs of memory that recalled honest lives and loves. Many of us had come to this place in search of spiritual amity, of community; but all of that died long before the fires.

"But," Debbie said to Mac on a gray morning before the bar opened, "how much of this sits on our own shoulders?"

Mac, who since the fires had remained largely silent, did not answer. Debbie turned from him and watched Sarah, because Sarah's shock seemed deepest, bone-breaking deep. Sarah made coffee and muttered Bible-text about King Nebuchadnezzar who God changed to a beast "...that you shall be driven from among men, and your dwelling shall be with beasts of the field; you shall be made to eat grass like an ox, and you shall be wet with the dew of heaven...." and then Sarah's voice whispered gabble, as though she spoke in tongues.

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"The sumbitch rubbed our noses in our own lives." Mac moved like a tired man after a twelve-hour shift. Gray light crowded against windows of the bar in the same way that, beyond the burned church, cattle crowded fences. Mac picked up a broom, looked at it like he could not understand its use, then leaned it against the bar. He sat on a barstool and waited for coffee.

"...and he was driven from among men, and did eat grass as oxen, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven, till his hairs were grown like eagles' *feathers*, and his nails like birds' *claws*...." Sarah's voice trembled with fear or ecstasy, and Debbie could not say which.

"That preacher drove himself," Mac said to Sarah, as if they were holding a normal conversation, "and he's driving us right now because he was serious, and we only think we are." He turned back to Debbie. "He's not in the fields. He's ashes. He's across the road right now, ashes in his burned church. I watched him set the fire. I walked away. He didn't." Mac turned back to Sarah. "He's preaching right now, if you listen you can hear...what do you hear?...or, maybe it's the voice out of the whirlwind...like in the book of Job."

It seemed to Debbie that, if Mac were not exhausted, he would be nearly as hysteric as Sarah. "I hear nothing from across the road," she said, "and if he chose to burn it's his expiation, not ours." Even though she detested Jeremiah, her mind filled with sorrow. Then she felt guilty without knowing why. And then, she felt something she could not at first understand. She had not felt joy in many a year.

She began to understand a little. Her first understanding was that she no longer despised Jeremiah. She fell silent. Listening. It seemed to her that from the fields came a sense of movement, the herd movement of cattle; and from the coast, echoes of screams.

"You're right about one thing," she told Mac. "He rubbed our noses in our own lives. Even if he's ashes, he's still doing it because nobody's leaving town. We're all still standing here, and we're unreal. We're staring over fences."

"The dreams were real," Mac whispered. "We're the husks of dreams." He looked across the road where white-faced cattle stood in mist. At the intersection of roads trucks slowed. An engine roared as a tractor-trailer driver caught a higher gear. Another engine roared. "Why did the guy do his own atonement and leave us holding the bag?"

"That's a cop-out," Debbie told him. "Dream new dreams and quit

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blaming the other guy." Debbie paused, alive in the knowledge that Jeremiah had failed with Mac but had succeeded with her. Jeremiah had forced them to hate him, had sickened them, so that they must rebel against their lives or die. He had fought that they might once more learn to love. There were many arts, and many roads to them. Maybe Jeremiah had been traveling a road of art, and not religion.

Debbie yearned to comfort Mac and Sarah, and yet she knew that would be wrong. She felt, in some harsh way, ordained. She watched Mac and saw that her words were going nowhere. But, Mac, being Mac, would think about them, so maybe later...and then Debbie made her voice stern, nearly punishing, and hoped it would not break with compassion.

"The world is full of gurus," she told Sarah above the roar of truck engines. "Find another one. Lacking that, you may want to consider a question." ☙

Coming Attractions

It seems like the streamers have scarcely been taken down from last year's anniversary celebration and now we're looking ahead to our fifty-first October issue. Fortunately, we remembered to get those invitations sent out on time. Here are some of the folks who have R.S.V.P.'d for next month's double issue:

Carolyn Ives Gilman, who has been away for much too long, returns with a fascinating story of when the sleeper wakes in "Dreamseed."

Robert Reed wants to take us boating in "The Gulf."

Kate Wilhelm plans to take us hiking in "Earth's Blood."

Ray Bradbury has booked time for us in his time machine, "Quid Pro Quo."

Lewis Shiner, James Morrow, and Alexander C. Irvine also say they'll be coming, as will our columnists Gregory Benford, Michelle West, Charles de Lint, and you never know who else is going to drop by.

If you like to make your reservations well in advance, we can promise you that upcoming issues will have new stories from Albert E. Cowdrey, Nancy Etchemendy, Amy Sterling Casil, S. N. Dyer, Jack Dann, and a passel of others. Also (now it can be told), we're planning to revive the single-author special issues—look for one to come in 2001.

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CURIOSITIES

THROUGH THE ALIMENTARY CANAL WITH GUN AND CAMERA, BY GEORGE CHAPPELL (1930)

GARY Trudeau conducting a tour of Ronald Reagan's brain. J. G. Ballard flensing a drowned giant. Isaac Asimov orchestrating a fantastic bloodstream voyage.

What do all these expeditions — through cellular landscapes entered via shrinking or across enlarged physiognomies encountered as geography — have in common? A likely ancestor is George Chappell's *Through the Alimentary Canal with Gun and Camera*, a profanely comic and bodily disrespectful tour through the helpless interior of an anonymous citizen.

Presented as the first-person scientific account of an unnamed explorer and his three companions, *Through the Alimentary Canal* is a continuously hilarious, linguistically inventive parody of two genres: the safari memoir and the layperson's medical compendium. After circumnavigating the exterior of their victim (not omitting the naughty bits), the explorers, without any technological fuss, simply slip through the "Oral Cavern" and before you can say "down the gullet" are riding their portable boat toward their ultimate destination of "Colon-sur-mer," through a surreal jungle environment populated by various tribes such as the savage Haemoglobins, and rich with such wildlife as heeby-geebies and gastroids. The visitors fish for phagocytes, carve their initials on the spine, and are entertained in the Peritoneum by the Great Omentum, a local rajah. Along the way, Chappell satirizes academia, Prohibition, religion, national pride, and our quirky mortal machinery.

Chappell (1877-1946) belonged to that great generation of humorists that included Benchley, Thurber, Perelman and Leacock, and wrote a number of lesser books under the persona of Dr. Traprock. But this slim imaginative masterpiece surely deserves resuscitation.

—Paul Di Filippo

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